

SERMON ON THE HEALING OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN
Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30
February 7, 2021
By Archpriest Peter Olsen

We find our Savior today in the region of Tyre and Sidon. These are Gentile cities in Phoenicia, north of Palestine. Today Sidon is known as Saida, or Sayda, and is the third largest city in Lebanon. The land was also known as Canaan, so the woman in today's Gospel is called a Canaanite. She is also commonly referred to as "the Syrophenician woman". The Hebrews held first claim to this territory and regarded the Gentiles who inhabited this area with contempt. Our Lord makes it clear that no one will inherit the Kingdom of God simply as a birthright. Furthermore, Jew or non-Jew, slave or free, Roman or Greek, all are called to salvation in the New Covenant established by our Lord. The Canaanite woman is an example to all of us how we should approach God. She has a firm belief in the power of Christ and that He can heal her daughter who is possessed by a demon. She approached the Lord with faith and humility. She recognizes her weakness and unworthiness and approaches the Lord with humility. Even her physical posture reflected her attitude because she bowed down to the Lord in a humble way when she spoke to Him. She makes no demands, she feels no entitlement. She asks the Lord for His mercy and help. Any request that we make of the Lord should be done this way. Not only in our prayers, but every time we approach the Holy Mysteries of the Eucharist we are approaching the Lord Himself. When we approach the Holy Mysteries, we should not approach with an attitude of entitlement, for we are entitled to nothing from God. Everything that we receive from God is a free gift to us who are unworthy. We should approach the Lord in the Holy Mysteries with repentance, humility and acknowledging our unworthiness and sinfulness. St. John Chrysostom comments that the Canaanite woman represents all repentant sinners who wholly lean on God's mercy and beg for God's forgiveness and blessings. The Hebrews were not averse to referring to the Gentiles as dogs. Jesus tests the woman's faith in order to make an example of her faith to all of us. He speaks to her like a Jew when He says, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and to throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26). How would we react if we asked something from someone in a respectful and trusting way and this is how he answered us? These words of our Savior, however, do not deter this remarkable woman. She does not react with anger, neither does she feel insulted, so great is her faith and humility. She perseveres and wisely responds, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 15:27).

May God help all of us to follow the example of the Canaanite woman. May we cultivate humility and self-reproach in our hearts. May we banish pride from our hearts and instead may we be filled with repentance, love and faith. Amen.