

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

MATTHEW 15:21-39

THE key to the understanding of this paragraph in its relationship to the progress of the King's enforcement of His claims, is to be found in the opening statement: "**Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.**"

A similar statement has occurred before in this Gospel three times at least; and now again we read that He withdrew; but here a break is indicated, and a marked contrast is manifested in the things before His withdrawal and those which followed. Perhaps we may summarize the whole matter by saying that He withdrew from the infidelity of traditional religion, to the faith which lives outside the covenant.

He had been exercising His ministry amongst His own people, and, as we have seen, there had been an increase of confidence; men had gathered to Him, and had been helped, healed, and blessed by Him.

On the other hand, there had been a clearly defined growth of opposition, which, so far, had culminated in the coming of the deputation of Pharisees and scribes, who raised in illustration the whole question of His method.

Now turning His back upon them, and the whole ideal for which they stood, He broke more definitely with His own people than ever before, and went to Tyre and Sidon. The story following gives us the picture of His ministry among people other than His own.

- The Canaanitish woman,
- The multitudes that gathered to Him at Decapolis,
- The multitudes that He fed.

These were people outside the Hebrew covenant of flesh relationship. He passed over the border, crossed the line of geographical limitation, and first dealt with the woman who was a daughter of the outcast people.

He then exercised the power of His Kingdom among people who were all outside the covenant, and who came into living relationship with Him upon one single principle, as we shall see. Finally, in a great beneficent flow of His tenderness, He fed the multitudes outside the border of Israel, as but recently He had fed the multitudes within that border.

Such is the character of the passage we are now to consider.

First, let us look still more carefully at this contrast of place, and people, and condition. To the King the journey to Tyre and Sidon was one of set purpose, and for specific reason. He must have been supremely conscious of all the blindness that had happened to Israel, of the darkness that had settled upon God's own people, and to Him, may we not say, it was a journey in which the song of the larger purpose was in His heart.

The story of Tyre and Sidon - the region long under the curse of God - lay in the background. Not long before, when warning the cities inside the geographical boundary Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum He held Tyre and Sidon up, as an illustration, to a people who had received the light, saying Tyre and Sidon would have repented in sack-cloth and ashes had they had the same light. Having dealt with the Syro-phoenician woman, He left the immediate neighborhood of the cities, and came to the sea of Galilee. Mark distinctly tells us that He came into Decapolis, so that it is evident that He remained in Gentile territory and among Gentile people.

Let us look, then, at the new people by whom He was surrounded.

Beginning with that Canaanitish woman, we recognize that she was a direct descendant of people who were outcasts in the divine economy, people who had been swept out on account of their awful and disastrous failure in the past, because the love of God needed to make way for purer people to fulfil His purpose in succeeding generations.

We learn from Mark that she was a Syro-phoenician woman, and a Greek. The word Greek does not refer to nationality. She was not a Greek by birth, but one of the Semitic peoples, and yet not within the covenant. She was a Greek by religion, and Greek, as Mark used the word, meant heathen. It has been said that this was the first heathen convert to Christianity.

She was undoubtedly a worshipper of Asherali or Astarte, that strange system, false and degraded on the one side, high and beautiful on the other.

There were elect souls who saw the higher ideal, and who walked in the glimmering light. It may be this woman in the worship of Astarte had realized the highest ideal possible to her of religion. But presently, she turned from Astarte the goddess of nature, because she was unable therein to find the answer to her deepest need.

The new people also were foreign, using the word foreign as the Hebrew would have used it.

In the last part of our chapter, at verse thirty-seven, we read, "**And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets full.**"

In the fourteenth chapter and the twentieth verse, we read, "**And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full.**"

In chapter sixteen, "basket" in verses nine and ten represent different Greek words.

Jesus, in referring to the two miracles, said; “**Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand**” - that was the first miracle in the midst of the Hebrew people - “**and how many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand,**” that was the second miracle among these people outside the covenant “**and how many baskets ye took up?**”

He used two entirely different words in referring to the baskets. The word He used of the first miracle was the same as we have in the account of the first miracle, and the word He used of the second miracle was the same as in the account of the second miracle. There was carefulness and discrimination in this choice of words.

If we trace this through the Gospels, we shall find that the four Evangelists give the account of the first miracle, and they all use the first word. Only two of them give the account of the second miracle, and they both use the second word. The difference is that the first word translated basket refers to a *receptacle that was peculiarly Hebrew, a small basket in which the travelling Hebrew carried his food*. The second word basket refers to a *much larger receptacle, platted and woven, the basket carried by the Gentile merchant-man on his journey*.

With all accuracy we may describe the difference by saying that the one was the basket of the Jews, and the other the basket of the Gentiles.

All this strengthens the view that the feeding of the four thousand was the feeding, not of the people of the same economy, but of people outside. We see the King halting with the child of the cursed race. We see Him healing people outside the covenant in Decapolis. We see Him feeding four thousand people outside the covenant.

Now mark the new condition to which Jesus had come. He had turned His back upon the critical unbelief of the rulers of His own people; and He found Himself in the atmosphere of faith; and this fact drew forth from Him a remarkable commendation. He had warned the people against the Pharisees, the rulers of religion in their own age, but to a woman outside the covenant, an idolater, a worshipper of Astarte, He said, “**O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even, even as thou wilt.**”

This faith was manifested not only by the woman, but also by the multitudes. We see Him returning from the city and going to Decapolis and climbing the mountain, and we watch them thronging up after Him. What a sight it must have been, these people crowding, hurrying, jostling after Him, carrying sick, blind, maimed, lame! The Greek word suggests a great rush, and hurry. They flung them at His feet as fast as they could bear them to Him, and as fast as they came He healed them. What wonderful reticence there is in these Gospel narratives!

Whole crowds of miracles are packed into a passing sentence: “**He healed them.**”

What made these people bring these sick folk? Faith. Not faith as a theoretical conviction, not faith as a creed recited, such as the Pharisees had, but faith in a Person, faith in His ability. With all reverence we may say that day in Decapolis was a great day for Jesus.

- He found one woman, and He said, “**Great is thy faith.**”
- He found great multitudes of people in the midst of idolatry, who nevertheless when the light shone, answered it, and carried their sick to Him for healing.

Finally notice, however, that the feeding of the four thousand was not the answer to faith. It was the overplus of His tenderness.

Let us not try to add dignity to it by robbing it of its simplicity. He knew that if the multitudes went back as they were they would be hungry and faint; and He fed them. It was the King, unable to hold His bounty in check when hungry men and women, although outside the covenant, were in need.

The great truth taught by all this is that the benefits of the Kingdom are granted to simple faith.

Look at this woman.

- In the background was her religion;
- In the foreground was her need.

The worship of Astarte, perhaps, had sufficed for her till then. But when the dark day came, and the demon entered her child, and she cried and wailed to the goddess Astarte, there was no answer. And so as this woman came to Jesus Christ we see her religious background fading away, because it could not help her.

In the foreground there was her anguish. Mark how she came; how faith operated. She came first of all against prejudice, for the prejudice of the Gentile was as great against the Jew as that of the Jew against the Gentile. Here the prejudice was on both sides, and yet this woman, driven by her need, came to seek Him.

She persevered against silence. Sometimes we question the meaning of Christ’s strange attitude towards this woman.

In Mark’s Gospel we read, when He came into this region “**He . . . entered into an house, and would have no man know it.**” He went into the house for rest. How did the woman get to Him? Mark says, “**He could not be hid.**” Why not? She was outside, and her need drew Him forth. He could not remain in hiding or in rest while that woman was outside in trouble.

And when He came out of the house she proffered her request, first calling Him Son of David; and He was silent. And the disciples came to Jesus, and said to Him, “**Send her away: for she crieth after us.**”

We might misunderstand that request if it were not for Christ’s reply to her, which shows that they meant, Give her what she wants and let her go. They were not unkind; they did not mean, Refuse her, send her away. Christ’s answer was, “**I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**”

That was His reason for not giving her what she sought. She still pleaded; and dropped the title distinctive of Hebraism “**Son of David.**” She put the whole of her need into the one word, “**Lord, help me.**”

Then He turned towards her and spoke, and at the first moment His speech seemed almost more unkind than His silence. “**It is not meet to take the children’s bread and cast it to the dogs.**”

Here again occurs a word we need to examine. There are two distinct words for dogs, and they mark two entirely different ideas. We all know how profound was the hatred of the Hebrew to the low, marauding, fierce, half-scavenger, half-wolf dog of that country. But then it is also true that dogs were found in Jewish households; they were the little dogs, the playthings of the children; and the word Christ used here was that for the little dogs.

Probably there was a great welling of pity and tenderness in the voice of Jesus as He said to her, “**It is not meet to take the children’s bread and cast it to *the little dogs.***”

Now, on the basis of that distinction, let us see what she said “**Truth, Lord, yet *the little dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.***”

Notice carefully the placing of the apostrophe. “**Masters**” is plural. It is as if she said, It is true I am outside the covenant; they are masters, they have been for centuries. If you say you cannot take the bread of the children and give it to the little dogs under the table, the playthings of the children, it is quite true; but even the little dogs have the crumbs. It is not surprising that Jesus looked at her and said, “**O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.**”

- Against prejudice she came,
- Against silence she persevered,
- Against exclusion she proceeded,
- Against rebuff she won.

That is what He found outside the covenant. Her appeal was based on faith.

- When she said, “**Son of David,**” *it was the hope of faith.*
- When she said, “**Lord, help me,**” *it was the appeal of faith.*
- When she said, “**Truth, Lord, yet *the little dogs eat of the crumbs,***” *it was the tact of faith.*

It is what an old Puritan commentator called “*the wit of faith,*” using the word wit in the true old Saxon sense, the tact of faith. Turn for a moment from the woman, and glance at the multitudes.

We have exactly the same truth the Kingdom benefits given in answer to faith. The bringing of the unfit to Jesus was a venture of faith, in all likelihood the outcome of this woman’s victory, for faith is always propagative, and someone else will believe because we have believed. Let faith in Christ be manifested in some victory we gain, and there is nothing in the wide world more propagative of faith in other people. As we see these people crowd up the mountain sides carrying all the incompetents of the neighborhood, what does it mean?

That one woman's faith, which had won a victory, had created faith in Jesus in the whole district and neighborhood, and amongst all the people. And what did He do? He answered them all as they came. Oh the glory of the King! All the difficulties were in Jerusalem among those men who were always washing their hands! Christ has no difficulty with the man who is polluted with sin, when that man sighs his soul to Him in faith. But He has a good deal of difficulty with the traditional ritualist. It is the man who comes with the great burden, who in faith commits his need to the King, that feels all the virtue of His healing pass into his life. There was no difficulty with these people when they believed.

When these people obtained their blessings, "**They glorified the God of Israel.**"

These were not of Israel after the flesh. They were outside, they were people of Decapolis. They were the condemned Gentiles, but they glorified the God of Israel. Why? Because one Man, Jesus of Israel, of Judah's Kingly tribe, had fulfilled toward them the Divine intention.

When God made the nation He said, to the Founder, "**I will bless thee and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing.**" This Man, living in the covenant relationship under God's blessing, was made a blessing; and through Him the rivers of God's life were flowing, not merely inside the geographical boundary in which He lived as a Jew, but out to Tyre and Sidon, to Decapolis, to a Canaanitish woman, to the multitudes of men and women outside the covenant! Thus the Divine ideal for Israel was realized in this King, and outsiders were made of Israel in spirit by faith.

Finally, notice how the movement of the latter half of this chapter is the demonstration of the strength of faith.

Perhaps He took His disciples there, that they might see the thing He had not been able to show them in the midst of His own people with their traditionalism and ritualism; that they might see faith working free and untrammelled; and as He took them there He revealed to them the force of faith in contrast with the barrenness of ritualism.

In His dealing with the woman there was not half the severity we sometimes imagine. In His every action there was a gleam of light.

First, He came out of the house and was silent; but she could not forget that because she was outside claiming Him, He had come forth.

This was the inspiration of her firmer faith. Then when she cried, and He was silent, let us remember that silence is not refusal; indeed, we have heard that silence gives consent! In His silence there was still the gleam of hope. When He answered the disciples she heard Him say, "**I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**" In that there was a suggestion of hope; she may have said within herself, Then perhaps He will do something, after all; If He is after lost sheep, perhaps He will come outside the one fold and touch me. Then she cried, "**Lord, help me**" That cry was born of the gleam of hope when He said "**lost sheep;**" and when He turned to her it was not with the tone of severity, as we have already seen.

Christ never spoke severely except to Pharisees. He was leading her on, increasing her faith. He knew the strength of her faith, and He wanted to bring it out into all its strength. He could have said to the woman, “**great is thy faith**” at the beginning, but He led her through the process of sifting until it flamed into the sight of men. The strength of faith as developed by Jesus, seems to be the special value of this story.

And then, finally, notice the King’s pure pity as He fed the multitude.

That feeding was not an answer to faith. The crowd did not ask Him to feed them. The disciples did not seem to believe that He was called upon to feed them. They had seen Him feed the multitudes in Judea; but that was within the covenant, and the geographically correct place. But there was pity in His heart and power there; and though among people who might never see the spiritual life, still He fed them, lest they should faint by the way.

Behold the King. Behold Him with the woman, all strength and tenderness, merging from the process of apparent severity to the triumph of a great beneficence. Behold Him with the incapable people as they are brought to Him, the breadth and plenteousness of His power operating on their behalf. Behold Him with the hungry; in simple and exquisite sympathy, He fed them.

Let us learn from this meditation what is the law of relation to this King which brings men into the place of blessing. It is faith which is persistent; faith which is amenable to law, answering every word He says: “**Lord, increase our faith.**”

In our relation to Jesus Christ as His messengers and workers, let us look for faith in unexpected places. Let us not keep out of Tyre and Sidon because there are no good people there. There is a freshness of faith everywhere waiting to surprise us if we will only venture to cross the line.

~ end of chapter 45 ~

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