

Ask, Father James:

Jesus replied; woman; "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26). Was this a hate speech from Jesus?

This quotation was Jesus' response to a Canaanite woman who was dogging Jesus relentlessly to heal her demon-possessed daughter. It was a situation of what do you do with a pushy Canaanite woman who won't back off? Jesus tries to ignore her and even tells her that; "he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Jesus' disciples urge him to send her away. But the woman will not take a snub for no. She advances toward him, kneels down in the traditional suppliant position, and begs, "Lord, help me." Jesus then tells her; "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (v.26); to which she replies; "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Some people think that this was a seemingly cold, harsh and derogatory remark to the woman; and even some dog lovers take offense too. The feminists also consider this as subversive of marginalized women in Scripture. But instead of getting offended, the woman admitted that she was a dog that was only asking to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. And hearing her response, Jesus applauded her faith and granted her request. (Matthew 15:27-28).

To "not give the children's bread to the dogs" is not about Jesus being insulting a woman but it was about breaking an intergenerational curse that was placed on the Canaanites. This text is about lifting the curse -the intergenerational curse. In Genesis 9:25, Noah cursed Canaan. The punishment that was placed upon the descendants of Canaan (the Canaanites; Genesis 9:18-28) was what the woman begged Christ to cure her daughter from and also asked for the curse to be lifted from all descendants. Christ had repeatedly been silent about the woman's request but he reversed his position immediately after the woman showed great faith in Christ's power to reverse the curse.

Before this encounter with Jesus, to the first-century Jewish ears, the designation "Canaanite" would have had uniformly negative connotations. The Canaanites were living under the spell of intergenerational curse and were to be subservient to the other siblings. This explained why upon Israel's return from the Exodus in Egypt, they had to be dispossessed of their land in taking up residence in the Promised Land. They believed they are hated by God, and Israel is charged with their destruction (Deut. 20:17; cf. Num. 21:1-3; Josh. 17:18; Judg. 1:1-4). All interaction with them is forbidden, lest close association with them tempt Israel to abandon their covenant with the Lord (Exod. 23:32-33, 34:11-16; Deut. 7:2b-4; Ezra 9:1; cf. Judg. 2:1-3).

From this perspective, the fact that Jesus, when followed by a Canaanite woman shouting for him to heal her daughter, "did not answer her at all" (Matt. 15:23) demonstrates exactly the sort of behaviour one would expect from a pious Jew. Accepting the implied insult that she was like a dog, the Canaanite woman immediately agreed, "Yea, Lord; for the dogs also

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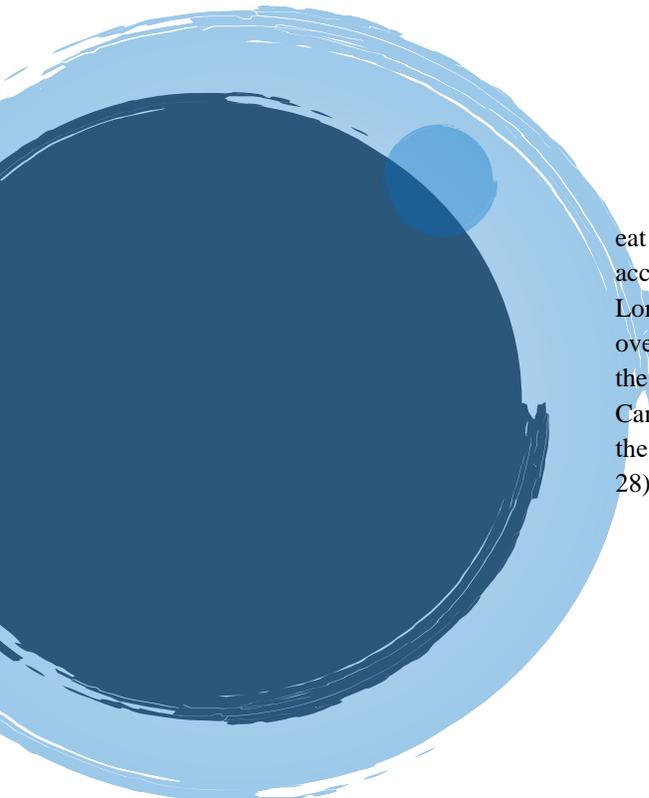


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eat of the crumbs that fall from the table of their masters." Jesus reversed himself, and acclaimed her faith. The Canaanite woman, though outside of the covenant, called Jesus Lord (kyrious) thus brought about repentance for her ancestral lineage by turning herself over to Jesus. The strength of her faith and intercession, believing that Jesus is Lord and has the power and his blessings shall overflow and give healing to her daughter and all Canaanites, living under the spell of the intergenerational curse. Jesus is deeply moved by the depth of that faith. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" (v. 28).

