

## 5/15 Sermon: What Would Jesus Say Now that a Non-Christian Moved in Next Door Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28 The Canaanite Woman's Faith

According to the Pew Research Center, the fastest growing religious group in our country are the nones. And no I don't mean the Catholic nuns, I mean those who when asked what religious affiliation they have, they mark "none". As of Dec 2021 it was estimated that 3 in 10 US Adults are non-affiliated<sup>1</sup> while in the 1980's it was 1 in 10.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile in the state of PA it is believed that 73% claim to be Christian (includes Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon, Jehovah Witnesses), 6% are Non-Christian (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, other World Religions), and 21% are the Nones (Unaffiliated)<sup>3</sup>.

So when working on the What Would Jesus Say Now? series regarding some of the concerns we may face to be his disciple, more than likely we will have someone in our life who is outside of the Christian spectrum. They may be a none, they may be a Muslim or a Hindu, or a Jew.

In Jesus case, he was faced with a Canaanite, someone different from his religion of Judaism, and how he handles this situation is a great learning experience in answer to the question: What Would Jesus Say Now that a Non-Christian Moved in Next Door? or the next Cubbie at work, or the desk at school.

So here is the background. Jesus is traveling in northern most section of Judea, at Tyre & Sidon, which are 2 cities along the coast of the Mediterranean West and North of Judea. These places are claimed by the Greeks, as well as some Canaanites, the people the Israelites fought when they entered the promised land after the time of Moses. At that time the Canaanites were described as a large and fierce people, not easily defeated, so the Israelites were only able to win the land through divine intervention, which occurs in the book of Joshua. So they do not worship God, nor honor God. They have various other gods that they serve. And given their history, you can imagine this is not a safe place for Jesus and his disciples.

In fact we get the impression Jesus was trying not to enter the area because the text says, *22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out so she came to him, not Jesus going to her, which is typically not the case.* And she is shouting, *'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'* Notice the respect she addresses Jesus with, *"Lord, Son of David"*. And then hear her plea, *"have mercy on me, my daughter is tormented,"* nothing cuts so deep as parent watching a child in pain, helpless to help. The text says that Jesus did not answer her at all. He didn't say yes, but he didn't say no. Then the disciples say to him, *'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'* Notice there is no compassion for the child from the disciples.

Finally, Jesus speaks up saying to the woman, *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'* Now this is an important part of this text I do not want you to miss. At this point in his ministry, Jesus was convinced that he was sent only to save the Jews. Jesus didn't remember the magi coming to visit, although he was probably told stories. *At this point Jesus mission was to bring the lost sheep of Israel back to God.* That's when the woman kneels at his feet to pray, saying, *'Lord, help me.'*

One of the harshest lines from Jesus follows when he says, *'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'* Now, Jews did not have pet dogs, Gentiles did. Jesus is comparing this woman and her people to their pet dogs. Not the Jesus we typically talk about. Yet keep in mind, according to Matthew, Jesus is still learning what his calling is and who it is for. But the woman is determined to get Jesus help beyond his confrontational language to her, she says, *'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'*

In these days pets were fed by sitting close to the table, watching, waiting, for leftovers. Gives you an idea of how desperate this woman is for her daughter. *She had no wish to take anything from anyone; in her simplicity and humility, a little was enough for her, crumbs sufficed,* no more than a look, a kind word from the Son of God. She is watching, waiting, for even leftovers from Jesus, to make her daughter better. She is reaching out to his religion to save her daughter. This is where Jesus is touched by this woman's determination and says, *'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'* And her daughter, the child of a Canaanite, who was an enemy to the Jews and had a different religion, was healed and made whole.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/state/pennsylvania/>

When it comes to interacting with people of other faiths or even the nones, what we learn from this passage is The woman and Jesus are not worshiping the same god in the same way in this passage. She is not inside the Jewish story of the Messiah, and he is certainly not inside her polytheism. Therefore, we need to recognize the religious differences with our neighbors, respect they have their beliefs, and certainly don't dismiss their beliefs as being insignificant to them. All religions are not one and they do not lead to the same place. The major world religions have different problems they address, different solutions or ways of salvation they use to address them, different techniques for achieving that salvation, and they have different models for that salvation.

Which also means, *we should never dismiss our beliefs either. Respect your own beliefs and if helpful, or asked for, offer them.* Especially when it comes to those times that some things cross religious ideas. Like when the neighbor is distraught, worried, upset. In this passage this is a sick child, and a sick child is something we all want to and are called to help. We believe that from the endless accounts where God worked for such restoration, outside the Jewish faith. Such as when God saves Hagar and Ishmael from abandonment. OR sends Elijah to save the son of the widow of Zarephath. And in those times that a sick child is not a topic of concern, *God reached out to others as well.* Be it the Israelites with Rahab (a Canaanite woman who became an Israelite spy), or Jonah and the Ninevites (Assyrian gods), or Paul and the Greeks in Acts 17 where they had a statue for an unknown god, and he revealed his God.

So that in answer to the question: What Would Jesus Say Now that a Non-Christian Moved in Next Door I believe Jesus would say, as He says in *John 3:16-17* <sup>6</sup> *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* <sup>17</sup> *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* Meaning, in Jesus, we believe he offers the way to *our salvation with no condemnation to anyone.*

So friends, if you find yourself connected to a non-Christian, don't walk away from them or avoid them, God may be using you at some point, to reveal what you know, it may be with your words, it may be with your actions. But most of all, may it be with respect, respect to your neighbor and their beliefs, and at the same time respect to the beliefs that claim you for Jesus Christ.