

What Is Jesus Up To?

I have often said that when we are faced with a difficult text, we must first ask what is God up to in the text. In the case of the Gospels, this question could be altered to ask what is Jesus up to. It isn't that this text is overly difficult to understand, but Jesus is not acting the way in which He had up to this point in the Gospels nor how we think Jesus should act. To better understand this text, as is the case with most Biblical texts, it is better to put this into the context found in the surrounding text.

The first part of the text, the part about what defiles a person, follows an exchange between Jesus and some Pharisees where Jesus calls them hypocrites because of the legalism that they had devised in order to get around God's law while giving the impression that they were following the Law. The Pharisees had asked Jesus why His disciples did not follow the tradition of ritual cleansing before eating. This is not about washing your dirty hands before you sit down to eat, but a ritual washing in order to be ritually clean. Jesus makes these opening remarks about what defiles a person to the crowds so that they really understand what Jesus is saying. So, now we have Peter asking Jesus about what He meant. Maybe Jesus was a little 'cranky' at the lack of grasping what God wants from the people that God chose. Perhaps, too, Jesus is getting a little frustrated with Peter in that he really isn't grasping who Jesus is despite what happened while walking on the water earlier, which we heard last week, as well as what Peter and the other disciples had experienced thus far with Jesus' teachings and miracles.

In the encounter with the Canaanite woman, who was not Jewish, He appears to be very cold, uncompassionate, uncaring, even insulting - all those things Jesus has not been before in Gospels. However, when we look at it from a Jewish understanding of the role of Messiah, Jesus isn't being insulting here or turning His back on the woman, but using

some Middle Eastern humor recognizing the woman's statement of faith. In effect, Jesus is saying, "If I am who you say I am, then you also know that I was sent to those from the house of the Shepherd King who are lost & I'm surprised you recognize Me." Jesus then heals her daughter.

What Jesus is doing here is saying his primary mission is to find the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus knows that the mission will extend to the Gentiles with the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, but at this time, Jesus is to focus primarily on the lost sheep of Israel, the children of the covenant God made with Abraham.

Still, in both of these instances, Jesus is uncharacteristically 'meanish' towards Peter and the Canaanite woman. Even if there was no offense taken by the woman, it still shows a side of Jesus which we normally do not see and furthermore, would rather not pay any attention to, much like the judgmental side of God which many people choose to ignore and focus on the kind, gentle, forgiving aspects of God. But these stories are included in the Biblical record to remind us that there are those sides to God and Jesus, sides that while not the 'nicest' must still be acknowledged.

If the story of Jesus is a made-up story in order to portray Jesus as the Messiah when He really wasn't as some Christianity detractors assert, then why would Mark and Matthew include this story in their Gospel accounts? The easiest answer would be that Mark and Matthew understood that the exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman was not insulting and they did not think that it cast Jesus in an unfavorable light. Maybe they didn't think that Jesus was being frustrated at Peter's lack of understanding who Jesus is, just frustrated as the Old Testament prophets had become frustrated that their message was not heeded by the powers that be.

The way in which Matthew constructed his Gospel account would naturally lead us to draw comparisons between Peter and the Canaanite woman. Whether it is the Peter who had little faith while walking on the water or showing a lack of understanding of the

meaning behind the parables, we tend to see comparisons between Peter and the woman. When we look at the social status of these two people, their different responses to Jesus seem even more drastic. Peter was one Jesus' the inner circle while the woman was not only a woman, but also a *Gentile* woman, someone who would be considered to be on the edges of society. Peter expressed doubt that it was Jesus walking on the water. Recall he said to Jesus, "If it is you...." The woman expressed a certainty of the identity of Jesus, declaring Him to be 'Son of David' a term referring to the Messiah. If this outsider could identify Jesus, then why couldn't Peter? Is this a cautionary warning to us from Matthew that we should be careful how close we get to the center of the social structure? Maybe the closer to the center of the social structure we become, we feel we have more to lose and require more 'proof' before we make that leap of faith. Perhaps there is another reason why Matthew included this story in his *Gospel* account. Maybe Matthew saw Peter's actions as those being guided by Satan, trying to place doubt in Peter's mind as to the identity of Jesus. Whatever the reason, it is here and we do need to deal with it.

So, in getting back to asking what is Jesus up to in this text, we see a disparity between Jesus' actions and His words, at least in the case of the Canaanite woman. He says one thing, yet does something different. Jesus saw that His mission was to the house of Israel and not yet to the *Gentiles*. Yet, the Canaanite woman reminded Jesus to look towards people with an eye of compassion, regardless of who they are. She also reminded Jesus that God's grace is sufficient for all. There is more than enough grace for God's chosen people that those outside of the covenant still benefit when they believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In this case, Jesus says one thing, yet does another which shows us how wide the Kingdom of God is.

In this *Gospel* text, we do not see Jesus in the most positive light. Still, despite this we are given the reminder that God's grace is for everyone, everywhere. The only

thing we need to do is to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In so believing, we are given a hope that transcends everything that we can physically see or experience and opens up the possibilities of what may happen. This allows us to face any hardship that may come our way, knowing that the hardship will not define who we are, but our faith defines whose we are. In that faith, we place our hopes on the God who is the Creator of all, the One who can and has defeated all the forces that rise to keep us from knowing our full potential in God's eyes. May we have the faith of the Canaanite woman who reminds us that God's grace is for all and that even a 'crumb' of God's grace is sufficient for our survival.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/bYrxIlbIBq4>

Service: https://youtu.be/_bVXVgwOfLQ