

# DOGS AT THE TABLE?

(or: how to find your place in God's Kingdom, especially when you don't think you have one)<sup>1</sup>

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## Matthew 15:21-16:12

**I** will never forget the look on his face. This poor dog had been seated on a chair at a cafe in Neutral Bay, as if he was catching up for a coffee with his owner and her friend. Then, when it was wall over, instead of being led away on a leash, the dog was lifted up in this lady's arms and carried away. Now, this dog was not a small dog either, it was a serious effort to lift it up and carry it off. And call me old fashioned, but I think dogs should sit at their owners' feet, and then walk around on the ground on their own feet. And I think the dog thought the same too! He had this shy and embarrassed look on his face as if he knew very well he didn't quite belong here, that he was out of place, that he wasn't sure how he had really ended up in this position.

And I wonder if many of us in this room understand a little what that feels like. That slightly embarrassed feeling of thinking you don't quite belong. Of looking around and questioning if you aren't out of place — almost as if you have turned up in the Kingdom of God by accident. For some of you it could be that you're still just checking out Christianity, and you can't help but compare yourself to others around you and question whether you are really the kind of person who could be a Christian. Or maybe you have already trusted in Christ and believed the gospel — even for a long time — and for whatever reason you feel still like you're an outsider. As if you don't quite fit *in*. Do I really *belong* here?

Well that's not a new question. And the series of stories we have just read address that very issue: who really is an *insider* in the Kingdom of Heaven? How can you find your place at the table with king Jesus? Who really *belongs*?

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<sup>1</sup> The title is adapted from a sermon by Russell Moore on this passage: <https://www.russellmoore.com/2008/08/31/jesus-likes-dogs-in-the-house-how-to-find-your-place-in-the-kingdom-of-god-especially-if-you-dont-think-you-have-one-matt-151-29/>

And in this passage, Jesus is at pains to teach his disciples that being an insider in the kingdom doesn't depend on pedigree or credentials, but on faith alone. That we don't earn a place at the table with Jesus, it is only given to us by grace. For belonging in the kingdom is not about ultimately about religious seriousness, or theological sophistication, or sensational signs — it's simply sticking with Christ, and being satisfied with him alone.

We're going to trace those three ideas — faith alone, grace alone, & Christ alone — as they emerge in the passage before us today.

## Faith Alone

So let's read from Matthew 15:21,

*Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out...*

And straightaway we need to notice that Matthew is doing everything he can to show us that this woman who comes to Jesus is an *outsider*.

First, Jesus has moved on to the region of *Tyre and Sidon*. For those who knew their Hebrew Bibles, Matthew might as well have been saying: "Jesus went into **paganland**." This is the heart of Gentile country.

And the woman is specifically identified as a *Canaanite*. Again, this would set off alarm bells for any Jewish readers. The Canaanites were more than just gentiles. They were Israel's oldest enemies. They represented everything that was dangerous and hostile to the faith of God's people. And so as this woman arrives on the scene she couldn't be more beyond the pale. She couldn't be more out of place in the presence of Jesus. She is the ultimate outsider.

But listen to what she cries in verse 22: "*Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.*" Somehow, this woman has remarkable insight into who Jesus is. He is the Lord. He is the promised Son of David, God's chosen King. In the next chapter, Peter will confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God — but this woman, this outsider beats him to the punch. She has a desperate need, and so she comes to this Jesus for mercy. Her daughter is in the grip of hell, possessed by a demon. And so where else can she turn but to Jesus, the Lord of heaven. It really is an incredible approach to Christ.

How much more incredible, then, is Jesus' reply. For he responds with silence. Nothing. And that's not even the worst of it. For when he speaks he seems to actively deny her request. And then it escalates even further in verse 26 — isn't Jesus being outright offensive when he says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.?" It all seems so...un-*Christ*-like.

So what is going on here? Is Jesus being insensitive and offensive? Does Jesus really need to be convinced to help this woman in her need, just because she is a gentile? I don't think so. For we've seen again and again through Matthew's gospel the way that Jesus reaches out across every possible boundary to bring healing and liberation. He's healed lepers, and cast out demons. He healed a Gentile centurion's son, commended his faith, and told of how people will come from every nation to be share in the feast of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He has told parables of how his kingdom will spread to cover and influence the whole world. Even consider the fact that Jesus has come to this very region of Tyre and Sidon. It doesn't really make sense that Jesus would lead his disciples into the heart of Gentile country only to be *surprised* that—shock horror!—there would be actual *Gentiles* there.

Well, perhaps Jesus is testing the woman's faith. Does Jesus need to see if she is really genuine in asking him for help? Again, this doesn't really fit with the evidence in the text. As we've already seen, the woman's appeal and approach to Jesus is *exemplary*. Elsewhere we see Jesus testing the Pharisees who approach him *cynically*. And he tests those like the rich young ruler who come to him *pridefully*. But I can't think of another place where Jesus tests someone who comes to him so *humbly* and so *faithfully*. Jesus shows us repeatedly that he has deep insight into the thoughts and attitudes of the human heart. Surely he doesn't need to confirm her faith, for he can already see it. But there *are* others present who can't see it. There are others who lack the same spiritual insight as Jesus. There are others with Jesus who are walking not by faith, but by sight.

And that's the disciples! Which is why I think Jesus is not testing the woman, he's testing the disciples! He is revealing, as dramatically and shockingly and *memorably* as possible, that this outsider of outsiders has a place in his kingdom - because she has *faith*. It is, after all, the disciples who respond to the woman's cries, and Jesus' silence, by asking to send her away. Look at her. She's an outsider. And she's a nuisance. She doesn't belong. Send her away.

Notice, too, its not exactly clear who Jesus' speaking to in verses 24 & 26. It simply says, *Jesus answered*. And then *Jesus replied*. It's almost as if Jesus is not directly addressing the woman, but the disciples more generally. Only in verse 28 does Jesus turn straight to the woman and speak directly *to her*. Then he does not challenge her, but commends her. He doesn't reject her in her distress, but restores her daughter.

I think that's the point. Jesus wants these men to marvel at this woman. Several times in this . This woman has great-faith. And he makes sure that they simply can't miss the point. And it's the same for us as we read it today. The shock-factor of this passage is *meant* to make us do a double-take, to dwell on the faith of this woman, and to discern what makes it so great.

For unlike the Pharisees who took offence at Jesus at the start of chapter 15, she refuses to leave Jesus until she receives his help. Her faith is tenacious — she doesn't give up when it appears like Jesus is refusing her. It is humble — she doesn't appeal to her own righteousness or worthiness, simply to the mercy and kindness of Jesus. And her persistent, tenacious, humble faith in Christ is *enough*. She only asks for crumbs, for she knows that just a little bit of Jesus is all she needs. In her great distress, all she needs is *him*. And then she will be fine. And so she is.

Judging by appearances, this woman has no place with Jesus. She is the ultimate outsider. But you do not belong in the kingdom by appearances. After his resurrection, Jesus will send his disciples out to make disciples of all nations (see Matthew 28), and I think this story of the Canaanite woman would stick in their head. Reminding them that when Jesus says all nations, he means *all* nations. There is no one too far gone to belong to the kingdom of Jesus. Because being an insider in the kingdom does not depend on your history or heritage. It depends on faith.

## Grace Alone

Belonging in the Kingdom comes *through faith*. And that's because salvation is *by grace*. And this second point — grace alone — emerges as we keep reading the rest of chapter 15.

For once again we find Jesus in a remote place. They are literally in the wilderness. But Jesus makes it a place of abundance. They come out to Jesus with nothing at all, but in his compassion Jesus gives them everything. They bring only their need and emptiness, and Jesus helps them and fills them.

Even the little-faith disciples who forget the power of Jesus to feed the multitudes, are not only forgiven by Jesus but they are used by Jesus to serve and satisfy the people.

This whole passage is a witness to the grace of Jesus. Jesus heals because of grace. He teaches because of grace. He feeds by grace. And he equips his disciples to serve him by grace. Grace upon grace upon grace is the steady drumbeat of Jesus' ministry, and the very heartbeat of the gospel story.

But we can go even further than that. For Matthew tells this story in such a way that it rings with the echoes of Old Testament promise and expectation. Listen to these words from Isaiah 35, and hear the resonance with what we have just read in Matthew's gospel:

*<sup>1</sup> The desert and the parched land will be glad;  
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.*

*Like the crocus,*

*<sup>2</sup> it will burst into bloom;  
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.*

*The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,  
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;  
they will see the glory of the LORD,  
the splendour of our God.*

*<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the feeble hands,  
steady the knees that give way;*

*<sup>4</sup> say to those with fearful hearts,*

*“Be strong, do not fear;  
your God will come,  
he will come with vengeance;  
with divine retribution  
he will come to save you.”*  
*<sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
<sup>6</sup> Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
and the mute tongue shout for joy.  
Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert.*

What are we looking at, when we see Jesus feeding the crowds? We are seeing the glory of the LORD and the splendour of God. As Jesus strengthens and helps those who come to him, he shows that he is Israel's God come to rescue his people. Is it any wonder that the people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. Is it any wonder that they praise the God of Israel.

And when you hold this together with the story of the Canaanite woman, you get a glorious picture. Those who ask for mercy are given help in their need. The humble heart that is willing to accept crumbs, is actually satisfied with an over-abundant supply. Those who come with the empty hands of faith, are filled up with the riches of God's grace. Those who seek Jesus, receive Jesus. And that's really what belonging in the Kingdom comes down to: being with Jesus the King.

## **Christ Alone**

And that's our third point. Salvation is by grace, through faith *in Christ Alone*. Matthew teaches us this point through the negative example of the Pharisees and the Sadducees at the start of Matthew chapter 16. For they approach Jesus, like the woman in chapter 15. But they could not be more different to her. She was the ultimate outsider. A Canaanite from a gentile region. These men are the ultimate insiders. They are leaders of Israel and guardians of the Scriptures.

That woman came with faith. These men come with a test. She came pleading. They come demanding. She came asking for mercy. They come asking *for a sign*.

They want something spectacular and special from Jesus. They want something super-spiritual, and sensational. In their seriousness and their sophistication, they want something *more than* Jesus, and so they miss out on Jesus himself. Jesus tells them that they can interpret the sky and figure out the weather. But they can't see what's going on all around them. The only sign they will be given now is the risen Jesus himself, conquering death and ushering in the kingdom. For Jesus himself is the key to the Kingdom. For he is the King of the Kingdom.

They look like they are insiders, they look like they deserve a place in the Kingdom; they look like they *belong*. But they lack faith. They spurn grace. They turn from Christ. And so they find themselves on the outside looking in.

It's no wonder then that Jesus warns his disciples about the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Like yeast, it will slowly but surely lead them away from Jesus. So they need to guard against that concern for outward appearances and concentrate instead on the inner reality of faith.

But the poor old disciples are distracted from Jesus, too. They are not focused on the spiritual like the Pharisees, they are still fixated on the material. They think Jesus is berating them about poor planning, not packing the supplies they need for their trip across the lake. "It's because we forgot to bring the bread!" Is one of the all-time face-palm moments in the Bible.

Because of their little-faith, their minds are stuck on the stuff that Jesus gives. When what Jesus really wants is to give them *himself*. Jesus wants to cut his disciples off from the misguided and malicious teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees, so that they would cling only to him. For they don't need anything other than Christ himself. *We* don't need anything other than Christ himself. We don't need anything in addition in Jesus. For if we have him, then we have everything.

And so the question is: do you have Jesus? For if you cling to Jesus in Faith. And if you depend on his grace. Then you are *in*. You have a place at the table. You belong in the Kingdom, because you know the king.

Maybe you're a teenager and you've only been a Christian for a few years. And you could look at other kids who have been coming to church their whole lives and they know what to say and how to say it, and you wonder if they are not just a little bit more on the inside. But if you know Jesus, you belong. You're an insider.

Or maybe you're one of those teenagers who has been a Christian your whole life. And you're tempted to think that you really belong because of your Bible knowledge, or because of your church attendance. No! Look to Christ and cling to him — for he is everything you need.

Or perhaps you're an adult and you feel like you stand out a little bit from everyone at else at church. Maybe you feel like you look different, or you sound different, or you don't know as much, or you don't do as much. And you think that you're just a bit more on the outside. Dear brother, dear sister, if you know Christ you *belong here*. You are right there on the inside because you know and trust Jesus.

Or you could be one of those adults who really looks the part. You do a lot of ministry, you might even have a theological degree. You know how to pray, you know the right things to say. And you're tempted to find your security in your own theological sophistication or in your religious seriousness. No! All your knowledge and all your service is simply another gift of God's grace. What really matters is your faith, all that you really have is Christ.

Or maybe you are not yet even a believer. And really what's holding you back is you're not sure if Jesus is interested in someone like you. Deep down you think you're just not the sort of person who could be a Christian. Dear friend, be bold and come to Jesus and ask for some crumbs. And he will give you far more than that. He will give you himself. And that is everything you need.

In a moment we are going to share in the Lord's supper together. And as we do, I want you to notice what a counter-cultural celebration it really is. We live in a part of the world obsessed with outward appearances. We're always trying to present an image to the world, to project some picture of ourselves so that others would accept us and include us. And it's so easy to smuggle that attitude into church. As if we need to convince Jesus to accept us or include us by who we are, and how we look, and what we've done.

But in this meal Jesus has given us, we are reminded of how the gospel really works.

For we don't bring anything down the front to offer Jesus. We come with empty hands, for salvation comes through faith alone.

But we don't leave with empty hands. We come with nothing, but our hands are filled up with the goodness that Jesus gives. For salvation comes by grace alone.

And what we are given is nothing other than Christ himself. His body broken for us. His blood poured out for us. We are nourished and strengthened with Jesus himself, for salvation is found in Christ alone.

And so let us come to the table, trusting in his grace, feeding on *him* in our hearts by faith.