

In the Gospel reading we hear the Lord Jesus utter what may sound like very harsh and unwelcoming words. Three times He refused to help the Canaanite woman. Only after a fourth entreaty did He decide to help her. The first time He did not respond. Then He told her that He would not help her, because she was a Canaanite and that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then He says that it is not right to give His help to the dogs, meaning the Gentiles. Only after admitting that she was one of the dogs did she receive help. This gives us a picture of the Lord Jesus that is very different than we are used to. What do we make of this?

First, we must start with the idea that the Lord Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Yes, His Public Ministry did focus on fulfilling the promises that God made to the chosen people. Yet, there was more that happened after His Public Ministry, because the Lord Jesus is the Savior of all people. At the end of the Gospel According to Matthew the Lord Jesus commanded His apostles to make disciples of all nations. He would extend the salvation He won on Calvary to all those who need redemption.

The Lord's harshness is only a test for the woman, to elicit her faith. The Lord knew what her situation was, and that she needed help. He was repeating the kinds of objections that the Jewish people would have made at the time, not because He shared their disdain for peoples of other nations, but as a way for the woman to show humility. He knew that He would help her, but He wanted her to persist in asking, as a way of demonstrating her faith.

We might imagine the patience and the humility that she had. She did not give up when the Lord initially did not answer her. She did not give up when the Lord told her that He was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She might have taken such an answer to mean that as a Canaanite woman she was unworthy of His attention. If she was proud, she could have decided that the Lord Jesus was not worth the effort to keep asking.

She showed great humility when the Lord Jesus told her that it was not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. The woman could have easily been offended and walked away. She persisted and even acknowledged that she was not among the chosen people. She had the humility to recognize that the Lord Jesus' point was legitimate. She understood that the children of Israel had a special calling. She did not become angry but instead acknowledged that she had no right to impose upon Him, but persisted in asking for a favor anyway.