



BRAD JERSAK

Was Jesus a racist?

QUESTION: Why was Jesus so rude to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28? He seems to be downright racist when he numbers her among “the dogs.”

RESPONSE: To review the story briefly, Jesus has led his disciples to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. There, they encounter a Canaanite woman pleading for help, as her daughter is suffering from demonization. The disciples want to shoo her away and even Jesus seems to object initially, but after some banter, he congratulates her great faith and heals her daughter.

The trigger statement that offends readers is when he says, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” The children, in this case, are “lost sheep of Israel.” Jesus makes it sound like his mission is for Jews only and that they alone are God’s children. We’re reminded of the ancient animosity towards Canaanites, way back to Joshua’s time.

Some commentators try to downplay the harshness of Jesus’ language, insisting that he’s actually just using the term for ‘puppies’ and that it wouldn’t have sounded as rude in Aramaic.

Others believe that Jesus was in fact rude and bore the same xenophobic assumptions of any Jew, and that the woman was both right and successful in correcting him.

I personally don’t see it that way. In an essay written by Dave McFadden, he points out some important points that I propose are the keys to reading this story rightly.

First, we know that even before this incident, Jesus’ vision for ministry was not restricted to Jewish followers. Great crowds followed him from the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon, as well as Decapolis and beyond the Jordan (Matthew 12:24-25, Mark 3:8). He had already healed a centurion’s son in Matthew 8 and declared that “many will

come from the east and west” to the banquet of the kingdom of heaven (11-12).

Further, within the story, McFadden says, “There is a clear progression in the pericope, starting from a racial standoff and concluding in a granting of the woman’s request and a warm commendation of her “great faith” by Jesus.”

But is the progression we see happening in Jesus? Kenneth Bailey, in *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, suggests, rather, that he was “voicing and thereby exposing, deeply held prejudices in the minds of his disciples.” Jesus progresses “through the prejudices in the minds of his disciples” and obliterates them with a miraculous display of God’s grace for this foreign woman.

Meanwhile, the woman herself seems unoffended and progresses from initial pleading to emboldened faith. Jesus knew how to apply resistance that would not shut her down or discourage her resolve. Instead, as elsewhere, he geniously draws the “great faith” from the wellspring of her motherly love. And this is in contrast to the “little faith” of his Jewish entourage (Matthew 8:26, 14:31, 16:8).

So, we ask again: Was Jesus rude? Was he a misogynist (woman-hater)? Was he a racist? Not even a little bit. He was, however, continually working among disciples and opponents alike, drawing them out of their own ignorance into new ways of seeing those who did not look, speak or worship like them. He continually challenges them to see their value, their hearts and the surprising authenticity of their faith.

I wonder, as a Jesus-follower, how this story might expose my own prejudices and remind me that the bread of Christ is available for all. Who are the Canaanites in my world? Will I be too narrow-minded and offended to welcome them? Or will I make space at Jesus’ table for them, too?

Lord, open my eyes to see others as you do. □