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Perfect Richteousness

Jennifer Thweatt-Bates
thweatt_bates@hotmail.com

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for their lives depend on it.

I have a good friend who told me a story about his three-year-old son, Derek. Little Derek would often sing himself to sleep, and especially at that age, he would sing out just as loud as he could. My friend would often tiptoe down the hallway and sit at the bottom of the stairs just to listen to him. Derek would sing songs he learned in Sunday school or songs he heard his parents singing around the house or playing from a CD. But every once in a while, he would just sing what he was thinking or feeling—almost like a three-year-old writing a song, or even singing a prayer. One night he went on at length about how much he wanted to be close to God, addressing him in first person, and saying over and over again how he wanted to be close to him and see what he looks like. And at one point, little Derek sang out as loud as he possibly could, “I just wanna be close to you, I just wanna see you, Jesus!”

Oh for the heart of a child. A child knows just how needy he is, and he isn’t afraid to ask for—even cry out for—help. A child can accept the gift of the kingdom for what it actually is without thoughts of earning or deserving it. She knows she needs it—and she knows she needs the one who freely gives it. Indeed, the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.



Perfect Righteousness

JENNIFER THWEATT-BATES

Jennifer’s ministry began with work in China through the organization China Now! She received her M.A. in theology at Abilene Christian University and is currently ABD at Princeton Theological Seminary in the area of theology and science. She preaches and teaches on occasion for Christ’s Church in Brooklyn, New York.

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And Jesus left there, withdrew into the area of Tyre and Sidon. And, would you believe it, a Canaanite woman from that region came and cried out, saying, “Have mercy on me, Son of David! My daughter is evilly possessed.” And he answered her not one word. And the disciples coming to him asked him, saying, “Send her away, because she’s making a scene.” And he answered, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered and said, “It is not right to take the bread of the children and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” Then Jesus answered, “Woman, great is your faith! May it be as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that hour (Matt 15.21–28, the author’s translation).

Ever embarrassed to admit you’re a church-going, Bible-believing Christian? Let me just say that there are days when I’d really rather keep quiet about this fact. TV preachers, national news stories about megachurch preachers’ scandals, and *The Revealer* furnish enough embarrassment material that some days I wish I were just an inoffensive Buddhist, or something.

Matthew’s story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman actually sounds like a story you might read in *The Revealer*, a story about a TV evangelist/healer who walks around the streets of New York City, tight-lipped and clenched-jawed, ignoring the bag lady shouting desperately after him, “Help me! Help me!” Not a stellar moment for Christianity. Not a stellar moment for Jesus, either.

It’s one thing to be embarrassed by a TV preacher shouting some nonsense about prayer hankies. It’s quite another to be embarrassed by your very own Lord, the Son of God, Jesus himself. And we’re presented with an embarrassment in this text. Suppose this were you, walking down the street with a woman shouting “help me” following after you. You’d say to yourself, “What would Jesus do? Jesus would help this woman.” But forget it! Not even Jesus is doing WWJD. Jesus ignores this woman. The disciples aren’t any better;

their only concern is to plead with Jesus to shut her up, because she's making a scene. They don't ask him to stop and help her—they just want her gone, this very embarrassing, ultra-inappropriate Canaanite female person. They're not doing WWJD anymore than Jesus is!

This text burdens us with its demand that we rationalize Jesus' inexplicable behavior. We feel obligated to find ways of reading it that make it look less un-Jesus-like. Jesus—our example of perfect righteousness—can't come off bad, after all, so we have to find some way to understand this so that Jesus comes off all right. But it's not that easy. Jesus calls this woman a dog! Such is our collective desperation to understand this in a "nice" way that some commentaries suggest—in all seriousness, now—that what Jesus actually called her was something more like "nice little puppy."

So what's going on here? Well, here are some possibilities: 1) Jesus really was sent to the Jews first and foremost, and he's not being rude or cruel, just telling the uncomfortable truth; in salvation-history terms, Israel is first, Gentiles are second; 2) Jesus is expressing a deep truth about all ministry: human beings are finite and ministry must always be done locally if it is to be effective; hence, he emphasizes that he must minister to those among whom he finds himself, that is, Israel. Others will just have to wait; and 3) Jesus is concerned with teaching his disciples a lesson about who's in and who's out, and therefore employs some irony and dramatic role-play as an attention-grabbing teaching technique.

Let's consider Door #1. Perhaps it is true to say Jesus was sent to the Jews first; Jesus is, after all, the "Messiah," a figure Israel had been waiting on for years. But is this really what Jesus says? He says, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Perhaps your Bible reads simply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The more literal double negative—"I was not sent except to Israel"—comes across a little stronger; in effect, Jesus says, if not for Israel, I wouldn't be here at all. To read this as a claim of mere chronological precedence—Israel happens to be the people God deals with first—or to read this as a pecking order within the kingdom of God doesn't capture the full sense of this statement. What Jesus says sounds like an exclusive statement without exception. Plus, everything we know from Jesus and even Paul tells us a pecking order within the kingdom of God is inconsistent with Jesus' teaching. Perhaps Door #1 only opens onto an empty room after all.

Maybe Door #2 offers a better explanation. Maybe Jesus was simply trying to say, "Look, I was sent to do a thing in a particular place and at a particular time, and I'm sorry, but you're simply outside my purview." After all, Jesus needed to rest and eat and he had only two hands and two feet and twenty-four hours in a day. There's simply a limit to what can be done, and you have to do what you can where you are. Maybe Jesus is just trying to say, "I have to do my ministry where God put me in the first place."

Tom Long, homiletics professor at Emory University, makes sense of this encounter by comparing Jesus to the founder of a battered woman's shelter. If a homeless man shows up on the doorstep of a battered woman's shelter begging for help, Long points out, the founder of the shelter may feel a great deal of compassion and yet still have to say no to his plea. Can she, should she, hand over the resources that she had worked so hard to gather for the women whose need is great, to someone who isn't a part of the group she ministers to?¹

As tempting as this explanation is, I find two things unsatisfactory about it. First, Jesus has withdrawn into the area of Tyre and Sidon and is hanging out in the iffy border-lands between Israel and Gentile territory. It seems he is looking for some R&R, but this bothersome and loud Canaanite woman seeks him out. If the issue is localized, specific ministry to those whom you happen to come across—well, this woman fits the bill. Second, we're not talking about disbursing funds, or ministry which seems to involve belabored effort; while it is true that Jesus is human and therefore subject to the same kinds of physical demands as everyone else, Jesus' healing ministry has always been a sign of Jesus' divinity. It's certainly outside normal human capacity. The analogy to the women's shelter, then, falls apart right at the point where it is supposed to illuminate. Jesus isn't going to run out of healing juice in the same way that a women's shelter is likely to run out of money.

1. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 176.

Perhaps we'll opt for Door #3. Maybe Jesus just doesn't mean it. At least, not in a straightforward, literal way. Perhaps he's being ironic! Maybe he makes this statement so strongly so that everyone will understand he can't possibly mean what it sounds like. Certainly, the woman doesn't seem put off; she, at least, seems to think that, no matter how final that first statement sounded, there is room for her in Jesus' ministry.

Maybe it goes something like this: Jesus has been hanging out with his disciples for awhile, and he knows there are some things they just can't get their minds around. So Jesus decides to play it out. Here's the perfect opportunity for a little dramatic lesson-teaching. First, Jesus ignores the woman—just like any righteous Teacher of Israel would do. The reaction of his disciples, though, is a little disappointing. Do they say, "Rabbi, don't you hear this woman crying to you for help? Why won't you stop and heal her daughter?" No, they say, "Jesus, can't you deal with this? Shut this woman up, she's embarrassing us, GOSH!" So Jesus says, still playing his ironic role, "I was not sent but to Israel." The disciples apparently have no objection to this statement, but the woman knows better. Instead of leaving, she kneels at Jesus' feet and says, simply, "Lord, help me." Maybe the disciples were grimacing and muttering amongst themselves, and Jesus saw they still weren't getting it—this woman's demonstration of faith and trust was still not enough to soften their arrogance and self-assurance regarding their own guaranteed places in the kingdom, and the woman's obvious out-of-placeness. So he plays it out even further, telling her, "It's not right to take the children's food and give it to dogs." Maybe the disciples "Amen-ed" and nodded. But the woman knows better. Certain that the Jesus she has heard of, and trusted enough to follow after, would be willing and even eager to help her—no matter who she is, or isn't—she replies, "even the dogs have a place, under the table, eating what the children don't want." Maybe the humility of this reply startles some of the disciples out of their self-satisfied stupor. Maybe Jesus is so happy that this woman is so certain of him and so trusting that he can no longer bear to continue in his ironic stance toward her, and now turns to her, eager to heal, eager to show her and the disciples that she and her daughter, too, no matter how "inappropriate" they are, are equally a part of God's kingdom.

I like this Door—you can probably tell. This ironic interpretation makes sense of everything: Jesus' weird behavior, the disciple's teenage-like angst over their image, the woman's persistence, Jesus' eventual change of heart. But, if Jesus went to such lengths to teach this lesson, well, there's no indication anyone got it. There's no verse to follow the healing of the woman's daughter that tells us anything about the disciples' response to Jesus' lesson.

Even in this interpretation there is a lingering sense that Jesus was a little unkind to this poor woman, who was begging for Jesus' attention, not even for her own sake, but for her daughter's. She has no idea that she is the occasion for an inventive and ironic episode designed for the disciples' benefit. She is hanging on to her last hope with the strength of maternal desperation, willing to suffer any humiliation to save her daughter. Certainly whatever callousness Jesus displays in using her this way is a great deal less disturbing than the unkindness of a straightforward interpretation in which Jesus calls her a dog and tells her she has no part in the good news he is preaching to Israel. But still, a little uneasiness remains: Does Jesus really use people in this way? Are we comfortable with that, and should we be?

I want to propose another possibility—one that doesn't get a door, because there's never any Door #4 on game shows. Certainly a lesson is being taught here. Perhaps Jesus, our example of perfect righteousness, *isn't* the all-knowing Teacher in this story. Maybe Jesus, like the rest of us, has something to learn; maybe what happens in this exchange is that Jesus, too, is a learner, and the Teacher in the story—unwittingly—is this fragile and yet courageous Canaanite woman, whose persistence teaches even Jesus something new about the nature of the kingdom.

Perhaps Jesus was stunned that the good news he was preaching to Israel had communicated itself to those outside its borders, to people who somehow grasped the essence of the limitless grace of the kingdom of God, somehow grasped that this kingdom, unlike any other kingdom they'd ever known, has no borders to defend, knows no outsiders. Perhaps it took a moment for Jesus to absorb this stunning truth. Perhaps even Jesus, in this moment, was dazzled by the unbounded grace of God, kneeling before him in the figure

of this inappropriate woman, humbly yet persistently asserting that she and her daughter, too, had a place in God's kingdom, as even the dogs have a place under the kitchen table. Gently and obstinately, the woman keeps insisting, we belong here, too.

It makes us a little uncomfortable to contemplate a picture of Jesus who's not in complete control, who isn't omniscient—who doesn't know the future, who doesn't necessarily know the intimate details and thoughts of everyone he encounters, who might have to learn along the way what it means to be the Son of God. Maybe Jesus seems a little less than an example of perfect righteousness this way; we think, after all, of perfection as something that doesn't, and shouldn't, ever change. But righteousness doesn't mean getting things right automatically, without having to think about it; righteousness, even the perfect righteousness of Jesus, includes being able to listen to the outcast, and re-learn what righteousness is. So our example of perfect righteousness is one that listens, and learns, and changes—listens even to the embarrassing, inappropriate voice making a scene of proclaiming the truth to the righteous One.

We are bold to declare ourselves followers of Jesus, and to make our goal to become more like Jesus in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. Sometimes this may mean that we are the righteous—who, like Jesus in this story, may need to re-learn what righteousness is. Like Paul, we must ever strive for the goal, without considering that we have attained it; when we find ourselves in the middle of a scene, with an unwelcome voice challenging our notions of righteousness, what shall we do? Stop, and listen, and learn, as Jesus did? Or shrivel in embarrassment and mutter to ourselves, like the disciples in the story? Do we deny a place in the kingdom to those we find inconvenient? Who are the Canaanite women of today, those claiming a place in God's kingdom that we wish wouldn't?

Or perhaps *you* are the Canaanite woman—struggling to boldly affirm that yes, you too may declare yourself a follower of Jesus, despite the muttering of those around you, who find you embarrassing and unacceptable. Hear Jesus' answer: "Great is your faith!" Share that faith with us, the struggling followers, the so-called righteous; teach us. Teach us a more perfect righteousness.

In this world, where we have to learn from each other how to be righteous all over again in every encounter, the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman gives us a picture of profound righteousness. Jesus, the Son of God, allows himself to be corrected by a loudmouthed, embarrassing female who insists that she too is a follower; she too is a part of the kingdom of God. This is righteousness at its truest and most humble: in the stubborn faith of the Canaanite woman, who will not accept anything less than perfect righteousness from her Savior, and in the profound and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, willing to listen and learn righteousness from even the most unlikely of teachers. May we all find the strength to follow Christ's example.



Stewardship of the Earth

ROBYN SHORES FOSTER

Robyn Shores Foster is the Minister to Children at the Manhattan Church of Christ in New York. She received her M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and preached this sermon in preaching class on February 7, 2005, as if she were preaching to the University Church of Christ in Malibu, California, which is her home congregation.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation,