

## More About Jesus, Week 25: Jesus did not discriminate

(John 4:1-10)

by Paul Hammons

One of the things that baffled and enraged the Jewish leaders about Jesus' ministry was that he always seemed to be talking to the "wrong people."

Jesus constantly seemed to be eating and drinking with "sinners" - people on the margin of society because of their own sinful choices or disreputable professions. He reached out to people whose physical conditions had separated them from Jewish society: he touched lepers, he had conversations with demon-possessed men. He listened when poor, blind men called out incessantly for help.

Jesus seemed completely unconcerned with how his interactions with people would be interpreted by others. That seems most evident in the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4, when Jesus did two things a Jewish rabbi would never do: talk to a Samaritan and talk to a woman!

*A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) - John 4:7-9 (ESV)*

The apostles returned to the end of Jesus' discussion with the woman, and we read that they "marveled that he was talking with a woman" (v. 27). And we see in this chapter the same attitude that Jesus showed in all his personal conversations: he was respectful, but truthful (v. 22); he addressed personal - often embarrassing - issues without apology, but also without shaming or ridiculing (v. 17-18); and he continually pointed the conversation away from the mundane matters of life toward deeper, spiritual concepts (v. 10).

Jesus did not discriminate when the opportunity arose to do good, to heal, or to teach. If someone had "ears to hear," he would speak to them.

He called tax collectors into his ministry (Mark 2:14) and chose them as hosts on his travels (Luke 19:5), always calling them to repentance from any fraudulent acts (v. 7-8). He acknowledged, cleansed, and even touched lepers, always directing them to obey the laws of cleansing and purity (Mat. 8:2-4).

He was willing to not only speak to a woman caught in adultery, but to withhold judgment on her, saying "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

Even when he did not want to be bothered or recognized while seeking rest in a foreign region, approached by people to whom he was not sent, he still responded.

Jesus' exchange with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 is sometimes interpreted by modern theologians as an example of Jesus' own prejudice as a Jew among Gentiles:

*And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." - Matthew 15:21-24*

But Jesus' ultimate mission as the savior of ALL nations - giving his life for all people including this Canaanite woman - demands a different interpretation. Because we know that Jesus could do only what the Father had called him to do during his time on earth, which was to preach to the Jews (Rom. 15:8, Mat. 10:5-6), but in a few years, this same region would be populated by Christians as the gospel spread (Acts 21:3-7). Jesus wasn't refusing help to the Canaanite woman, simply deferring it until God's plan directed it.

But in the same story, we also see Jesus' mercy - which suggests that his harshness might have reflected a desire to test the woman's determination. Was she willing to be humble in the face of the Christ's authority and accept whatever blessing he was willing to give? Was she persistent?

*But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. - Matthew 15:25-28*

Jesus never preached or tolerated prejudice. In fact, it is through his sacrifice that all nations, all backgrounds, all bearers of God's image are brought into fellowship in him (Eph. 2:14-18).