

**REALLY???**  
**Matthew 15: 21-28**  
**Don Lincoln**

When I was a junior in high school, a new associate pastor was called to our church in Cincinnati. His name was Hu Auburn. He was fresh out of Princeton Seminary, a good-looking guy, athletic, and he and his young wife brought a new vitality to the congregation.

Hu took charge of our youth group of less than ten students, but also began to engage high-schoolers like me that weren't attending youth group. He showed up at our sporting events. He invited me to play tennis with him, go sailing with him. He showed an interest in me and other students like me, and within a year, we were averaging 80 students at Sunday night fellowship.

Hu Auburn was one reason I ended up in ministry. He was a regular guy; a neat person; pretty cool guy who just happened to be sold out to Jesus. And while he was cool; he also seemed an exceptionally good person.

He always smiled. Always seemed glad to see me and anyone else I saw him greeting. I rode with him to several retreats. When driving, he always went the speed limit. If somebody pulled out on him, he simply slowed down, or swerved – never honked, never shouted, and NEVER cussed. I never recall seeing him angry; ticked off; bent out of shape.....

That is, until 5 years later, when I lived WITH Hu and his wife and two young boys. Hu had been called from our church to be head of staff of a large church in Cleveland. I was a junior in college, and had done some youth ministry at home Cincinnati. That summer, Hu invited me to be a summer intern in youth ministry in his new church, and to spend the summer living with him and his family.

It's funny how when you live with someone, you pretty quickly find out that they ARE human!! And not perfect. Hu was still a great guy, a cool guy, but I also found out he got angry, and ticked off, and sad, and anxious, just like the rest of us. I shoulda known – after all, he wasn't Jesus!!!

Which is one of the ways you might interpret this story from Matthew. That even JESUS wasn't always Jesus. Even Jesus had a bad day. BUT – I need to tell you, I've resisted THAT idea most all my life and ministry. I grew up with a "Perfect Jesus." I'm guessing many of you did too.

For me, "Perfect Jesus" was "*technically*" human, but....He never messed up, never doubted, never backtracked, and never had to say He was sorry. He always had

perfect reasons for saying the things He said, and for doing the things He did. So, if He happened, for example, to speak with harshness rather than compassion? If He behaved in ways that were ethnocentric and rude? If He called a hurting, pleading woman a dog? Well, He must have had a "**Perfect-Jesus-Reason**" for doing so.<sup>1</sup>

Some preachers have gone to great lengths – and some pretty interesting theological and textual gymnastics to keep Jesus perfect – especially with this difficult story of the Canaanite woman.

One preacher I know dealt with it this way in a sermon – listen:

"Was Jesus a Messiah-in-the-making, who needed to learn for Himself how big God's love was? If that's the case, how do we explain the fact Jesus has already cured the Centurion's servant, which seems against the notion that Jesus thought all Gentiles are dogs. And by this point He'd cured the hemorrhaging woman, so surely gender wasn't the issue. He's already called Matthew – 'a hated tax collector' – as one of His disciples."

That preacher continues: "I can't help thinking the attitude adjustment needed in this story was not Jesus, but Jesus' own disciples. When this woman first shows up, Jesus simply doesn't say anything to her. **WHO** tries to send her away as unclean? The disciples!

In the blink of an eye, the disciples turn on her, and want to trash this woman. "Get out of here. Go away. You don't belong here!"

Jesus knew what they were thinking. He knew the Jews had names for Gentiles, like the slang insults in every human tribe, names we all know, and too many of us have used at one time or another; names like "dirty mick", "kike," "spic," "cracker".....and the list goes on; you and I know it! Well the Jews called the Gentiles "dogs;" mongrels. And this woman wasn't just a Gentile; she was a Canaanite, the indigenous people Israel had to run out of the Promised Land in order to take it. An enemy of the people of God.

By all good Jewish standards, she should be sent packing. But Jesus heard this outcast woman call Him "Son of David." He knows she knows something. So, I think what Jesus does is hold a mirror in front of the disciples; to give them a good look at themselves.

So.....Jesus speaks the party line. He plays it out. "No way should I be helping YOU! Get out of here, you dog." And it goes in the exact direction Jesus wants. It's as if Jesus looks at His buddies, and says, "I was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel, right guys?" And you get the sense they're probably all nodding.

But to THEIR surprise, the woman stays right with Jesus – toe to toe, head to head, tit for tat – like a proverbial "straight man" – or in this case, straight woman – almost as if Jesus knew she could parry with Him, enabling Him to bring the lesson – and her daughter's healing – to conclusion. Jesus knows this woman's heart is good. I wonder if they both had a twinkle in their eye?

That's how one preacher handled it. **Isn't that nice.** Could it be any more tidy? Perfect Jesus. You know who that preacher was? That's a page from **MY** sermon on this text here at Westminster in 2002. It was my own angle on the very common traditional interpretation which says Jesus isn't really being mean to her, he's just testing her by constructing barriers to see if she'll overcome them. And when she passes her test, he gives her an "A" by healing her daughter.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of preaching exactly the traditional view that Jesus was testing her, I had a different take, and say he's testing the disciples. Nice angle, huh?

And maybe that fits for you; it did for me in 2002. **Perfect Jesus.** That's how I like Him, don't you? But that does raise some theological issues for us to ponder.

"Looking back with twenty centuries of holy hindsight, you and I are apt to make the **man** of Galilee the **superman** of Galilee. We tend to see Jesus as God unencumbered with human flesh and frailty. No questions, just answers. No problems, just certainty. No temptations, just an absolute, inherent, unfailing sense of right. Always loving and compassionate. Never biased or prejudiced. Perfectly programmed in every respect.

And to look at Jesus this way robs Him of His humanity. We make Him so wholly other, that He is no longer one of us. The incarnation becomes a fantasy, the crucifixion a charade, and the resurrection an illusion. It is sometimes more difficult for us to let Jesus be human than it is for us to see Him as divine."<sup>3</sup>

Do you and I get it? If we follow it through to its logical limits, and Jesus wasn't REALLY tempted. He didn't REALLY doubt in the Garden. He didn't ACTUALLY feel forsaken on the cross. Because He was after all – **Perfect Jesus.**

I still like my approach from 2002. Coulda been what happened. You can't tell the tone of his voice, you can't see cause we weren't there whether or not if He was winking at the woman before He lets the disciples have it. Maybe that's what took place. Maybe He was really was holding a mirror up to them to show them just what they sounded like.

Or maybe Jesus **WAS** having a bad day. The crowds have been pressing, the Pharisees have been second-guessing, and Herod has been beheading. Jesus has been healing 24/7, feeding thousands and thousands and thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, calming storms – and now he's gone way outside of Galilee to try to get a break; to get away. Maybe he's just had it.

But there's yet another approach. And maybe I like it because it still keeps my perfect Jesus from losing His cool.

It's that Jesus, in His true humanity, can still learn. C'mon. He was an embryo once. Somebody taught Him His ABC's, didn't they? Maybe human Jesus can still grow a little. He had certainly reached way beyond a whole host of boundaries, but perhaps even Jesus had a hard time getting past a Canaanite. Maybe even Jesus – human Jesus – is, to some degree, a product of His culture; a culture built on centuries old Jewish prejudices.

If Jesus was without sin, then maybe you and I don't want to go so far as to label Jesus a racist – someone who can't see their own prejudice and won't acknowledge their bias. But maybe, at least, we can think that in light of the woman's courage and determination and persistence – **her faith, which Jesus seems to acknowledge is a surprise to HIM** – maybe there has been just a little bit of light shed on Jesus' own limited view – inherited as it may be.

After all, Jesus says He thought his ministry was to be just to Israel and not to the Gentiles. And did that narrower understanding prevent Him, **in the moment**, from seeing the full humanity and needs of the desperate Canaanite woman kneeling in front of Him pleading for help?

Whether or not it did, you and I know **WE** – all of us – can be blind to the humanity and the needs of people who are not like us – people who do not look, think, or talk like us. Like our Savior may have, you and I know **WE CAN** get it wrong. We can make negative generalizations about whole groups of people, sometimes based on one encounter, or tragically even no encounter at all.

But thankfully, seeing her **GREAT FAITH**, Jesus responds by changing his mind – his attitude, whatever – and opens His already wide circle of caring even wider – wider than even **His** human self could imagine. And thankfully, like our Lord, you and I can also have our hearts and minds changed.<sup>4</sup>

And that, for me, is really good news. Because if Jesus can still grow, then so can we. And better yet – **NOW**, when you and I are called to be like Jesus – if He's not PERFECT JESUS, perhaps it means you and I have a better chance of actually following Him as He asks.

And.....perhaps it also means you and I have fewer excuses for not growing to be more and more like Christ.

Regardless of how we interpret it, this text invites you and me to imagine a world where the barriers we inherited or built up, have been broken down so that we and all God's people – all God's children – will be healed, whole and welcomed.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Debi Thomas, [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net), August 9, 2020.
2. David Lose, "In the Meantime," reflections on the text.
3. Bishop Philip L. Wahlberg, *The Clergy Journal*, August, 1993.
4. Courtney Allen Crump, "On Changing One's Mind;" *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, 2020.