

Even Jesus Was Teachable

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Aug. 16, 2026

based on Matthew 15:21-28

Let me begin with an oddity. Evangelical pastor, Russell Moore, editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today* magazine, often uses the bully pulpit of his magazine to express alarm at the number of self-professed Christians who currently reject much of Jesus's teachings, calling his teachings "subversive."

Moore told the host of NPR's, "All Things Considered" that his "moment of clarity" about this came as the result of having multiple pastors tell him essentially the same story about quoting Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in their preaching —specifically passages like, 'turn the other cheek' — and a congregant comes up after and says, 'Where did you get those liberal talking points?'

"And what was alarming to me," Moore went on, "is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would answer with, 'I'm literally just quoting Jesus,' the response would *not* be to apologize. The response would be, 'Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak.'" Or worse, "That's woke. "

Well, the gospel account we read today of Jesus and the Canaanite women might please those who criticize Jesus for being weak, at least at first.

The picture of Jesus that it presents doesn't square very well with sentimental images of a gentle, compassionate good shepherd, right? It tells of a moment where Jesus is first impolite and then downright rude to a woman who comes to him seeking help for her daughter.

She cried out to him, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

But Jesus doesn't even bother to answer her. He just keeps walking. Perhaps he was hoping that if he ignored her she would just go away. People do that. We all do it from time to time.

Listen to this story, told by Seth Anderson of Rhode Island.

In my final year of high school, while my peers wasted their time working on cars, attending parties or playing sports, I devoured books, especially the ancients – Plato, Cicero, Seneca – for they seemed to possess the secret of living the good life. Burning to read the ancient philosophers in their original tongues, I became a classics major in college.

I was fortunate enough to earn a year's scholarship at a prestigious Scottish University renowned for its Greek, Latin, and ancient history departments. Classes were held in a stately edifice erected before Columbus journeyed to the New World, and my professors were all widely published. Clad in black academic gowns and standing upon fancy platforms, they were like gods who rained down wisdom on their young ignorant charges.

I especially admired Professor G., who taught Medieval Latin. He was the type of scholar I hoped to be: aloof, brilliant, and disciplined. I would study his assignments at a prominent table in the department library and even hang around the dark, wood-paneled corridor where his office was, hoping to earn the least bit of acknowledgement from him. When he greeted me as he passed, I felt I was part of an elite cadre.

Since I spent so much time in the classics department I became friendly with the doorman, the clerks and the maids who would often stop and chat in lilting Scottish accents about their families or the weather. One aging portly cleaning woman named Margaret took me under her wing. We would walk the cobbled streets to her seaside cottage. Along the way she would ask me about my family and life in America. In turn she would talk about her deceased husband or her son Alistair who, as a teenager, had drowned in the sea in front of her house. "Auch, Aye, my wee Alie. I miss him so." In front of a peat fire we would share bread, cheese, and meat pies. Margaret reminded me of my own grandmother, and I grew to love her.

One Friday afternoon, the final day before winter break, Margaret and I were chatting in the empty library when professor G. strolled toward our table. As I quickly opened a book, Margaret called out, "Good afternoon, Professor G. How are you today?"

He walked to a nearby shelf to retrieve a book and left without deigning to answer her. Margaret slowly turned her eyes to the floor, clearly hurt. I reached over and held her hand.

There is a Latin saying: Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas which means, "Plato is dear to me, but dearer to me is truth." I earned my classics degree, but never became a scholar. Instead I went into human services.

Jesus too, kept walking.

It was unseemly for any woman to approach Jesus directly, but the woman in the gospel story was also a Canaanite, which one scholar describes as "one of the great unwashed with whom good Jews of Jesus' time had no contact. She was from the coastal region of Syria where strange gods were worshiped and ritual laws of cleanliness were unknown."

Think of it this way. Life was complicated for Jesus, as the gospel writer, Matthew, presents him to us. Everywhere he went among the Jews, people wanted something from him, but they didn't understand who he was or what his coming meant for them. Even after he taught them and healed them and fed them, they just didn't get it. And now, this.

This woman was a foreigner, a pagan, a Canaanite, and she had the temerity to call him Son of David, which means anointed one -- Messiah.

For Matthew who wrote this gospel, this was exactly what Jesus had been trying to get across to his own people every way that he knew how, and they missed the point every time, but this stranger, this "unclean" woman he'd never seen, somehow got it.

What irony - to finally get what you want from the one person you least want it from. Maybe that's why Jesus tried to ignore her. But, unlike the Scottish matron in the story I shared, the Canaanite woman wouldn't shrink down or go away, and she was starting to attract attention. Even the disciples who were used to the crowds pressing in on Jesus were starting to get embarrassed.

So they went to Jesus and urged him to send her away.

"Give her what she wants so she'll leave us alone," they say. "For goodness sake, she's making a scene!"

But he answers them this way: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel!"

It was as if Jesus was saying, "Give me a break. Don't you remember that just a few days ago we were feeding five-thousand. There are more Jews who need me than I can even begin to deal with. I have to draw the line somewhere. We've got to serve the needs of our own. There just isn't enough to go around."

He could have said, "Jews first." Kind of like, America first.

Well, you know the feeling. You pay taxes and you give to your church and the symphony, maybe, but still there are the appeals that come in the mail and email – a friend's GoFundMe page, Amnesty International, OHSU. How is one to decide which appeal to answer and which one to put in recycling?

Or the commercials about sad-eyed children who need your help? You know, where they say, "For the price of a Starbucks" – that's how they hook you – "For the price of a latte you can feed, clothe, house and send a child to school." Gee whiz. We can understand the need to draw the line and say enough is enough. We will do this much only, and no more.

We will consider providing in-state tuition, but only for children of U.S. citizens. The children of those immigrants who clean our motel rooms will have to fend for themselves.

It isn't that we don't care about their needs. But there just isn't enough to go around. We have to take care of our own, don't we? But who are our own?

It's at the heart of the argument J.D. Vance and Pope Leo have been having. Right?

Anyway, Jesus, perhaps feeling overwhelmed, draws the line . . . but the Canaanite woman steps right over it. When he wanted to turn away, she got right up "in his face."

When he tries to keep his distance, when he moves away from her and her need, she keeps moving toward him, until she's face to face with him, and then she kneels before him and says, "Lord, help me."

Now, it is much easier to turn away from another's need when you don't have to look her in the eye. Right? As long as she remains part of the nameless masses, we can make rational decisions about how we will limit our response. But some people just won't go away.

"Lord help me and my daughter," she says.

No longer able to avoid her he answers, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch ! He might as well have said, "Just what part of 'No' don't you understand, lady?"

Some have said that he must have had a twinkle in his eye when he said it, so that the woman knew that he was speaking, "tongue-in-cheek."

Maybe he was just testing her.

On the other hand, it could have been simply a blunt way to say, "Sorry, I can't help you. I've got too many other pressing worries."

Either way this remarkable woman refuses to be intimidated by him and interprets his comments in the way that best suits her needs.

"Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

"Yes, I agree that you were sent first to the house of Israel. Yes, I understand that we may not be your first priority.

But I also believe that there is more than enough to feed us all. If we are dogs, then at least let us have our kibble."

She didn't get offended at his words, she just called on him to do what she knew he was able to do.

Now, unless I'm mistaken, in all the stories in the gospels, this is the only time that anyone ever gets the best of Jesus in an argument.

We can only imagine what this moment must have been like as he realized that this audacious woman was right.

Maybe he threw back his head and laughed. But in that moment something changed in him. One can't help but detect a softening in his voice when he says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!" And in that instant, her daughter was healed.

Through this pagan woman's faith, Jesus learned that God's purpose for him was even greater than he had imagined.

Of this story, Barbara Brown Taylor has said, "The line he had drawn between him and the woman disappeared; the limits he had placed on himself vanished, and you could almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus came to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do."

Taylor says, "The woman's example of faith works like a lever on him, opening his arms wider and wider until there is room for the whole world in them, until he allows them to be nailed open on the cross."

You and I have met people like this woman from time to time, you know -- quirky people we want little to do with except that there is just something about them that at the same time, charms us, and somehow they get us out of our comfort zone.

Out of our comfort zone.

The heart of the gospel story this morning tells us that the will of God is that we be opened up, pushed to our limits.

So, where do you feel God pushing you to open up a little this morning -- out past your comfort zone? It can be a scary proposition.

I'll close with a little story I love about dealing with this kind of opening up. It's the story of one volunteer with Mother Teresa's Sisters of Mercy in Calcutta who spoke of her first day in a home for the dying:

She said, It was terribly traumatic for me - being a beauty therapist, I was used to everything being all spick-and-span, and smelling nice, so it was quite a shock.

When one of the sisters asked me to wash this particular woman. I just thought, 'There's no way.' I just couldn't. I just stood there.

She called me over and said, 'Penny, please. Take her.' I just cried and said I couldn't. So she said, 'All right, come with me,' and she picked up this little bundle of bones, because that's what this lady was, a bundle of bones, and she took her into the bathroom. Even now it makes me cry - there wasn't a lot of light in the room and I was still absolutely catatonic.

Then (I can't explain it) all of a sudden the whole room just lit up! One minute I was saying I can't and the next I realized, of course, I could.

It suddenly struck me, seeing one of those religious pictures they have on the wall - it was the body of Christ - that anybody can be Christ. It wasn't just that little old lady covered in scabies, it was the whole world that was the body of Christ. I realized then, that minute, that what I was doing for one, I could do for anybody."

You know, we don't have to go to Calcutta or the South Bronx to have our boundaries pushed back. We can discover the body of Christ in a lonely neighbor, an immigrant, a troubled child, a shut-in, someone who is sick or dying.

Wherever we are tempted to draw back, to turn away, to avoid someone's eyes, to tighten our protective circle - that's where God is calling us to let go of our limits, to develop a relationship with someone outside our boundaries.

"With Jesus as our model - we are called to step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves, not because we have to, and not because we ought to, or even because we want to, but because we know that it is God who waits for us on the other side." (Barbara Brown Taylor)

Amen