

“GOING TO THE DOGS”
MATTHEW 15:29-39

I have entitled today’s message, “Going to the Dogs.” I assure you it has nothing to do with the state of our economy, our country, or the presidential campaign that we are currently witnessing. It has to do with the shift in Jesus’ ministry focus beginning in the middle of Matthew 15. That shift is no small thing. I would compare it to the shifting of tectonic plates deep below the earth’s surface that produces a reshaping of the earth’s continents.

This shift, though it was prophesied many centuries prior, signifies a re-formation or a reshaping of the kingdom of God in terms of *who* will comprise that kingdom. Prior to this, Jews believed that they alone were the people of God and that the door to the kingdom was open exclusively to them. In Matthew 15, we see Jesus cracking that door open to Gentiles. And we know that a few years later that door would be flung wide open—to people of every tribe, tongue, nation, and race.

You will discover in a few minutes why I titled this message, “Going to the Dogs.” But first, let’s look at **Matthew 15:29**. ²⁹ *Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And He went up on the mountain and sat down there.*

Though Matthew gives scant details about the precise location of this mountain near the Sea of Galilee, it is extremely relevant to the meaning and significance of what Jesus is about to do. Remember, Jesus had just been in the district of Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile region north of Galilee called Phoenicia. It was there that He healed the demonized daughter of a Canaanite woman, whose faith He commended because it was so “great”.

One of the reasons her faith was so great is that, in response to her pleas to heal her daughter, Jesus had just said to her, *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”* (15:26). Children, in the statement, was a reference to the Jews. Pet dogs was a reference to Gentiles. And she replied, *“Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”* (15:27).

I suggested to you last time that Jesus knew He was going to heal this woman’s daughter before she even came to Him, and that He said what He said in order to test her faith. What is more, He said it in order to get His disciples to think outside of their theological box. For the disciples (and other Jews), the Messiah and the kingdom of God were exclusively for *their* benefit. Gentiles were outsiders who were not entitled to God’s attention or God’s blessings. Jesus wanted them to see that not only did this Gentile woman’s faith get His attention, it was the means by which she, too, became a benefactor of His blessings.

How does this relate to the passage we are looking at today? In Mark’s version of this story we read, *“Then He returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis”* (7:31). Decapolis was an area comprised of ten city-states which was accessible on the southeast side of the Sea of Galilee. It was inhabited by Greeks who had settled there in the fourth century B.C. after Alexander the Great’s conquest. So, it was also a Gentile region, comprised of people from a different race than Phoenicia. The people in this story were not Canaanites but Greeks.

Look at **verses 30-31**. ³⁰ *And great crowds came to Him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at His feet, and He healed them,* ³¹ *so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.*

Remember, these were people who had not previously been exposed to Jesus. They had certainly heard about Him and the miracles He performed because, even in this day,

word travelled fast. So, when they came to Him, they naturally brought their sick and disabled loved ones and laid them at His feet. But they must have been surprised, because Jesus was a Jew, and up until now, with the exception of His exorcism of demons from two tormented men in their region, Jesus had ministered almost entirely in Israel for the benefit of Jews. And they knew that Jews prided themselves on being the sole beneficiaries of God's blessings.

So, when they heard that Jesus had voluntarily come to their region and that He was accessible to them, they made haste, just as the woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon had made haste. They flocked to Him by the thousands, bringing their disabled loved ones and laying them at His feet, hoping that He would touch them and heal them.

And Jesus did not disappoint. Matthew is careful to list the various disabilities that Jesus healed—blindness, muteness, lameness, and paralysis. All conditions which, in that day, would have been accompanied by poverty and social stigma; all conditions which, in that day, would have prevented persons from being independent, productive citizens in their communities; all conditions which, in that day, would have been extremely time-consuming and burdensome for family members who cared for them.

And Jesus' power and generosity demonstrated on their behalf compelled them to be amazed, obviously. Their biggest wishes had just come true; their loved ones had just been healed instantly and completely. But they were also compelled to glorify *the God of Israel*, which was new for them.

If, indeed, these were Greeks, they had a number of so-called "gods" in their worship directory that they called upon when they were in trouble. However, there was never any reason to glorify these "gods" since they were considered impetuous, temperamental, preoccupied, and dismissive.

But in Jesus they discovered something they had never known in a deity. A God who gave them His undivided attention, a God who had compassion on them, and a God who gave them what they desperately wanted and needed. And it was so exhilarating to be in His presence that they would not leave. Look at **verse 32**.³² *Then Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way."*

This is the only reference in the Gospels (along with Mark's account of this event) in which Jesus says, *"I have compassion,"* a word that describes intense emotion or a visceral reaction. All the other occurrences of this verb are in the third person, in which the writers of the Gospels make an editorial comment about how Jesus felt. It would not have been lost on the disciples that Jesus Himself was declaring how deeply moved He was by these "dogs." No self-respecting Jew at this time would have ever admitted such intense feelings of endearment for Gentiles.

The specific reason Jesus felt this way about them is because they had become attached to Him—so attached that they would not leave, even after He had healed their loved ones. They had been introduced to Israel's God and had gotten a taste of true worship, and it was so invigorating that they didn't want it to end. So, they hung around where Jesus was for three days (and presumably two nights) and had gone without food.

Of course, human bodies need fuel, and after three days without food they began to get weak. And Jesus felt compassion for their weakness, concerned that if they did not eat before they left to go home, they would have no strength for the journey. He suggests to His disciples that at least some of them might faint on the way.

Verse 33, ³³ *And the disciples said to Him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?”*

You should know that just a few months before this the disciples had been confronted with an almost identical problem. In chapter 14 Matthew records the incident where Jesus and His disciples went by boat to a remote place where they could be alone. When the folks from Galilee heard where they were going, they ran along the shore and arrived at the landing before the boat. We are told that when Jesus went ashore and saw a crowd of several thousand people, He had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Those Galileans stayed all day into the evening while He healed and taught them, and then His disciples said to Him, *“This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”*

Jesus replied, *“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”* That is when they said to Him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” Then Jesus took those five loaves and two fish and blessed them, and then fed five thousand people with it until they were satisfied. Then they picked up twelve baskets of leftovers.

Which leads me to conclude that the disciples’ question in verse 33 is perhaps the most ridiculous question in the whole Bible? *“Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?”* Why would they ask this question when they had seen him feed a similar sized crowd in a desolate place a few months earlier? Why not say, “Lord, are you going to do it again? We remember what you told us to do last time, so we already went out and got all the loaves and fish we could find—seven to be exact, and a few small fish. Lord, hurry, because we can’t wait to see the look on their faces when you multiply them.”

Why did they immediately jump to the conclusion that it was impossible to feed so many people? I cannot be sure, but I would suggest that it was because they were human, just like us. And humans have some serious deficiencies, one of which is a short memory. We have an uncanny propensity to forget even the things that astounded us not that long ago. And as a result, we default to doubt and faithlessness, even when we are in the presence of Someone who has proven that He can do anything.

I think if I were Jesus, I would have been frustrated or exasperated with the disciples. I probably would have said, “O you of little faith...” or “You guys still don’t get it, do you? What do I have to do to convince you that nothing is impossible with me?”

But Jesus did not get upset. Instead, as before, He inquired about their provisions. **Verses 34-38,** ³⁴ *...“How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.”* ³⁵ *And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground,* ³⁶ *He took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks He broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.* ³⁷ *And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over.* ³⁸ *Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.*

Once again, Jesus feeds thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and some small fish. And once again, everyone who was present ate until they were satisfied. And the reason we can be sure of this is that the disciples collected seven baskets of leftovers after everyone had been fed.

Is the number seven significant? I’m pretty sure it is, since everything Jesus did and said had significance. But even though I have read several commentators’ attempts to interpret its meaning, I’m pretty sure that no one but God knows for sure why seven loaves were blessed and seven baskets were collected in this incident and twelve in the earlier

incident in Matthew 14.

What we can know for sure, however, is the far greater significance of what Jesus did for *Gentiles*—thousands of Gentiles. The benefactors of His power, compassion, and blessings were thousands of uncircumcised, unclean outsiders who had previously been enemies of God's people. Which proves that what He did in the district of Tyre and Sidon for the Canaanite woman and her daughter was not an aberration. It was not just a one and done brief encounter with a random Gentile with remarkable faith. Jesus spent three days with these people. He ate with them, something no Jew in that day would have done. And by doing so He was communicating that they were on His radar.

It also proves that when He said to His disciples in Matthew 15: 24, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"* He was actually challenging their theology and preparing them for a future ministry among Gentiles. For one of the most astounding things about the ministry of the Messiah as prophesied in the Old Testament is what He would do for *Gentiles*.

Listen to Isaiah, prophesying 700 years before Jesus showed up. *"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future He will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan—*

*² The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:1-2)*

What Jesus was doing in Matthew 15 in Decapolis, on the southeast side of the Sea of Galilee and along the Jordan River, is the fulfillment of this prophecy. Undoubtedly, His Father told Him to go there, because Jesus said that He did nothing except what His Father told Him to do. But I'm quite sure that Jesus had Isaiah's prophecy in mind as He ministered those three days in the Decapolis.

There is more. Isaiah also prophesied,

*⁶ "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.*

*I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,*

*⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness (Isa. 42:6-7).*

Isn't that exactly what Jesus did for those three days in the Decapolis? He was fulfilling this prophecy, but He was also opening the door of salvation to the Gentiles, for whom it had previously been closed. And this, brothers and sisters, is good news! This is the Gospel! As Jesus said in another place, *"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost"* (Luke 19:10), and that includes those who are non-Jews. Why? *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

I assure you that the compassion Jesus felt for these people was not merely because they were hungry and weak, but because they were creatures made in the image of God who had been living in darkness with no hope of being rescued. The main lesson of Matthew

15 is that God loves Gentiles, also, and that He sent His Son into this world to make a way for them, also, to be saved from their sin, to be reconciled to their Creator, and to have eternal life.

But there is another application from this story that, though less consequential, is still worth considering. In both stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes, He took a little and turned it into a lot. In the first story it was a little boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish, and in this story, it was seven loaves and a few small fish. In both stories it was everything the disciples could find—everything that was available. In other words, He asked them to give Him what they had, and even though it was little, He turned it into an adequate amount to meet the need.

I think there may be a principle here for us to consider. The amount that Jesus has to work with is irrelevant. He can multiply whatever amount He has, *or* He can make something out of nothing, just as He made the universe out of nothing. Jesus, who can do all things, does not actually need anything from us in order to accomplish His purposes. But there are times, like these two incidents, where Jesus may ask us to give Him what we have, even if it is little, and trust Him to turn it into an adequate amount to meet the need.

That may be true of our building ministry here at EBC. That may be true in our support of missionaries or ministries. We may think our contribution to those things is so inconsequential that it doesn't really matter if we give it or not. But that is not how God views it.

God is not limited by our lack of resources (though there are plenty of references in the Bible that suggest He is offended by our tightfistedness and may choose not to be generous with us if we refuse to release to Him what we have). According to Scripture, the only thing on this earth that limits Him is our lack of faith. Remember when Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth? The people there said, "We know this guy. He's Mary's boy. He's one of us." And we are told that Jesus did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Let's be careful not to limit God's power or thwart God's purposes because of our lack of faith. If God asks us to give to Him what we have, even if it is little, let's trust Him to use it to meet the need. Who knows, we may see Him multiply it in such a way that we are filled with wonder and are compelled to glorify the God of Israel.

Going to the Dogs **Matthew 15:29-39**

Main Idea: Jesus demonstrates His power and compassion on crowds of Gentiles who are amazed by His power and glorify the God of Israel.

Jesus goes to dogs (29-39)

The border towns called the Decapolis (29; Mk. 7:31)

Healing the disabled (30-31)

Gentiles are amazed by His power

Gentiles glorify the God of Israel

Feeding four thousand (32-39)

The composition of the hungry crowd

The motivation of Jesus (32a)

The conversation between Jesus and His disciples (32b-34)

Jesus identifies the crowd's hunger and His concern (32b)

The disciples claim they can do nothing to help (33)

Jesus asks them to give Him what they have (34)

The solution to the hunger problem (35-38)

Jesus directs the crowd to sit and prays (35-36a)

The disciples distribute the food to the crowd (36b)

The crowd eats until satisfied (37a)

The disciples collect seven baskets of leftovers (37b)

Application

Jesus does not refuse anyone who comes to Him (Jn 6:37)

Jesus can do a lot with very little