



# Shaped to Serve

Sunday, March 5, 2017

## Syrophoenician Woman: The Mama Bear

### Some Background

Women are prominent in the story of Jesus. He was born of a woman, had myriad interactions with women, and was seen first by women after his resurrection—but there's something distinctive about Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman.

She came to Jesus desperate: her daughter needed to be freed from an unclean spirit. And while we have seen a kind, benevolent Jesus in other stories, in this story we meet a Jesus who called the woman a dog and shooed her away. This would not have come as a surprise to Jesus' followers. This woman was a gentile—an outsider! She had her own people, her own healers and doctors and magicians. This unclean woman and her unclean daughter weren't part of the plan to save the lost sheep of Israel, and Jesus bluntly told her so.

But for the Syrophoenician woman, who was willing to do anything for her tormented daughter, “no” was simply unacceptable. Amazingly, her persistence seemed to change Jesus' mind and marked a shift in Jesus' ministry to Gentiles. He had an earlier, positive encounter with a Gentile centurion, even comparing his faith favorably to Israel's faith. Yet, in many ways, Jesus' ministry had focused on the Jews. Concern for Israel's salvation gave him no reason to spend his time on this outcast woman. But her determination revealed that God's banquet always has leftovers. In her unwillingness to surrender, she got what she needed, and Jesus discovered the overflow of God's grace.

**Famous Quote:** “Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.” —Maya Angelou, author and poet

**Teacher Homework:** Read some key passages about the Syrophoenician Woman: Matthew 15:21-28 / Mark 7:24-30.

**Youth Mindset:** Youth are immersed in a culture that calls out for them to want things—sometimes to the point of desperation. The Syrophenician woman was desperate for something *really* important. Look for opportunities during this session to talk about the difference between wanting something and being desperate for the sake of someone else.

### **Opening Activity**

Have the group shout out barriers that they see in the world today, and record their responses on the board. Be prepared to prompt youth to think about racial, gender, social, physical, age, and religious examples.

### **Watch the Video**

Show the video: “Syrophenician Woman: The Mama Bear.”

- What surprised you about the video? What questions might you have about it?
- How can you relate to the characters in this video? To the Syrophenician woman, to Jesus, to the disciples, to the daughter?

### **In the Bible**

Pick four readers—one to read the words of the woman, one to read the disciples’ words, one to read Jesus’ words, and one to read everything else in Matthew 15:21-28.

- How do you feel about the fact that the woman would not leave Jesus alone?
- What makes you admire or disapprove of the woman’s actions?
- What kind of parent does she seem to be?
- What in your life is worth standing up for?
- What would you describe as your bravest moment?

### **Tabloid Time**

Ask students if they have seen tabloids at local grocery stores. What kinds of stories are featured on many of the magazine? They are the controversial and scandalous things that the authors of these publications want to receive the most attention. This exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is the kind of thing that would make these magazines today. Jesus did not just break the bonds of sin and death for this woman—a woman who had no business conversing with him in the first place; he also breaks the bonds of sexism and bigotry. Imagine writing your own tabloid. In a small group, write up the front page of a magazine article highlighting this exchange.

- Where might Jesus hang out today? Who would he hang out with?
- What are some scandalous things Jesus might do to free us from social barriers now?

### **Closing Ritual**

Share in “highs and lows” from the week. Prayer together, this week highlighting the people it is so easily to ignore in our own lives. Pray for God’s help that we may see them more clearly and act as necessary to share in God’s love.

### **Take-Home Question**

Who in your school, family, church, or team might be invisible. Pray for them this week. How might you make that person visible in your life this week and show them God’s unfailing, barrier-breaking love?