The Power of God

On Pearls Before Swine, the Giving God, and the Canaanite Woman Who Would Not Stop Knocking

Rob Massie

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Two Kingdoms

Let me give this chapter a working title that will help us remember the contrast that runs underneath everything we are about to walk through. The power of God versus the power of the dog. God spelled forward and God spelled backward. The two kingdoms whose claims on our trust have been competing across the entire arc of the Bible. That is the contrast running underneath the seventh chapter of Matthew, and we will not understand the chapter until we have the contrast firmly in mind.

We are finishing the Sermon on the Mount. And this chapter ends with two famous warnings that most modern commentators read as *random, disconnected sayings of Jesus*. *Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine* (Matthew 7:6). And then immediately afterwards: *Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you* (Matthew 7:7). *Two passages, side by side, that look completely unrelated*. The commentaries usually treat verse 6 as a one-off saying that Matthew inserted here for editorial reasons, and then jump to verse 7 as the beginning of a new section.

I want to argue against that reading. The two passages are not disconnected. *They are part of the same homiletical pattern that Jesus has been using throughout the Sermon on the*

Mount: a pattern of naming a piece of *traditional righteousness*, exposing its limits, and then showing the deeper kingdom-pathway that Jesus is calling his disciples into. *Verse 6 names the traditional righteousness. Verses 7 through 12 give the deeper kingdom-pathway.* Once you see the structure, the chapter holds together with internal coherence that the standard reading misses entirely.

The Pattern of Matthew 5–7

Let me show you the pattern by walking through one of the easiest examples first. In Matthew 5, Jesus does this six times in a row: *you have heard it said, but I say to you*. Watch one of them:

> You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21–22)

You have heard it said. That is the piece of traditional righteousness. Thou shalt not murder. Excellent traditional wisdom. No one is going to argue against it. And the Mosaic law was right to enshrine it as one of the Ten Commandments.

But I say to you. That is where Jesus takes the traditional wisdom and exposes the cycle that produces it. Murder does not come from nowhere. Murder is the end-point of a process that begins with anger, escalates into the contemptuous dismissal of the brother (Raca, worthless fellow), and culminates in the conviction that the brother has no human value worth preserving (you fool). Once you have devalued your brother all the way down to that point, you will eventually act on the devaluation by taking his life. Jesus is teaching that the deeper kingdom-

righteousness deals with the heart-conditions that produce the eventual act, not just with the final act itself.

And then comes the pathway out:

> Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23–24)

That is the kingdom-pathway out of the murder-producing cycle. Before the anger escalates into Raca, before Raca escalates into you fool, before you fool escalates into the murderous action, go and be reconciled with your brother. Interrupt the cycle at the earliest possible point. That is the deeper righteousness.

Three parts to the pattern. Traditional righteousness (you have heard it said). Exposed cycle (but I say to you, here is what actually produces the violation). Kingdom-pathway (here is how the cycle is interrupted at its root). Jesus uses this same three-part pattern repeatedly across the Sermon on the Mount. And I want to argue that he is using it again in Matthew 7:6 through 12, but the commentaries have missed it because they have treated verse 6 as a one-off.

Don’t Give What Is Holy to Dogs

So look at verse 6 with this pattern in mind:

> “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (Matthew 7:6).

That is the piece of traditional righteousness. The Jewish mindset was *thoroughly baked* on this concept. *Holy things go to holy uses. They do not go to dogs. They do not go to swine.* And what was a *dog*, in the Jewish symbolic vocabulary? Look at Psalm 22, which is probably the most quoted Psalm in the entire New Testament narrative of Jesus’s passion:

> My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? . . . For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet . . . They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots. But You, O Lord, do not be far from Me; O My Strength, hasten to help Me! Deliver Me from the sword, My precious life from the power of the dog. (Psalm 22:1, 16–20)

Dogs have surrounded Me. Deliver My precious life from the power of the dog. In the Davidic Psalm, the Psalm Jesus would quote from the cross, the dogs are the imperial enemies of God's anointed king. The Gentile nations encompassing Israel. Rome, in Jesus's day, was the great dog. And in the case of Jesus himself, who becomes the representative of all Israel, Rome, the dog, was encompassing him at the cross.

And the Psalm resolves with the kingdom-claim:

"For the kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations" (Psalm 22:28).

Even the dogs are ultimately under the Lord's rule. But the immediate point of Psalm 22's dog-language is that the surrounding Gentile nations and their imperial systems were not where God's people were supposed to place their trust. Those nations were the dogs. They were not the ones to whom you gave the holy things: the prayers, the worship, the ultimate trust, the deep adoration. That was the traditional wisdom. And the traditional wisdom was right, as far as it went.

The Cold November Run

And let me make the application of this concrete in the contemporary moment, because this is exactly the place where Christians get confused in every election season. Don't think that you are going to vote in somebody who is going to bring in the righteousness of the kingdom of

God. It is probably not going to happen. Well, it is not going to happen. I do not want anyone disappointed. I am telling you now, so you will have plenty of time to absorb it before the next national vote.

Here is what happened to me in the 2000 election. The Bush-Gore election. I stayed up until one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning, watching hanging chads being counted in Florida. Nobody knew who was going to be president. And little did I know that nobody would know who was going to be president for another thirty-some days. I was sick over it. That was a Tuesday night, and the next morning, I called in sick from work. Not physically sick. Politically sick. I just could not face going into the office not knowing how the election was going to resolve.

And I felt the Lord saying: *what is your problem, man?* So I went outside. It was a cold November morning. I went out to the greenway here in our local area, *before the nice new greenway was built over by the baseball fields*, and I just took off running. *Cold start, full-on, all-out running.* If you ever try to run in the cold without warming up, *be careful*. I ran about a mile and a half and got back to my truck and thought I was going to throw up. *And I felt the Lord say: are you done?*

And I have not been really political ever since. That cold November morning on the greenway was the deliverance. If I come off as apolitical, it is probably because I am. I have made my peace with the limits of what civic engagement can accomplish.

And let me be careful to draw the right distinction here. This is not to say that we should disconnect ourselves from the opportunity God has given us in this nation to vote in the most probable candidate who will bring peace and promote life and the important things we hold dear, to preserve the power and the freedom in this nation to continue to worship God as we see fit.

That much is something I can get in line with, and we should all be engaged with. Voting matters. Civic engagement matters. The protection of religious freedom in any given political season is a real concern that the people of God should take seriously.

But to think that the right political outcome will solve our problems: That is what it means, in the Jewish mindset, to give what is holy to dogs. Only God can give you what you need at the deep level. And every season in which the people of God transfer their ultimate trust from God to the political process is a season in which we have, however inadvertently, taken the holy thing and laid it at the feet of the wrong recipient. The dog cannot deliver what only the Master can deliver. That is the diagnostic. And it applies in every electoral cycle, in every political moment, in every season of cultural anxiety. Don't give what is holy to the dogs.

Pearls Before Swine

And the parallel image, *do not cast your pearls before swine*, works the same way. Look at how Matthew himself unpacks the *pearl* image later in his Gospel:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45–46).

The pearl of great price is the kingdom of God itself. The merchant in the parable is on a journey, searching for valuable pearls. And when he finds the one pearl, the kingdom of God, all other kingdoms become secondary. They become insignificant for solving the deep daily problems of human existence. The merchant sells everything he has to acquire this one pearl, because he has recognized that this pearl is in a different category from all the other pearls he has ever evaluated.

Now you can hear what Matthew 7:6 is warning against. Do not cast that pearl, the kingdom of God itself, before swine. Do not exchange the wisdom of the kingdom for the wisdom of the surrounding world systems. The swine will trample it. And then, as the verse warns, they will turn and tear you in pieces. The very world-systems you have given the kingdom-pearl to will turn on you and use what you have given them against you.

And the *trampling under foot* image is itself a deliberate echo from earlier in the Sermon on the Mount:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Matthew 5:13).

Trampled underfoot by men. The swine that trample the pearl are people, the men of Matthew 5:13, not literal pigs. The whole image of casting pearls before swine is about people who will trample what they have not learned to value. And later in Matthew's narrative (in Revelation 11, which echoes Matthew's vocabulary) John is told to measure the temple, but the outer courts leave out, for they have been given to the Gentiles, and the Gentiles will trample the holy city underfoot (Revelation 11:1–2). Same image. Same trampling. Same warning that the holy things are not safe in the wrong hands.

So the traditional wisdom is good as far as it goes. Do not give your trust and ultimate confidence to the surrounding world-systems. Do not exchange the pearl of the kingdom for cheaper pearls. But just like thou shalt not murder, the traditional wisdom alone does not finish the work. We need the deeper kingdom-pathway that Jesus is about to give us in verses 7 through 12.

Ask, Seek, Knock

Here it is:

> Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7–8)

Ask. Seek. Knock. This is not calling your congressman or your senator. This is not calling the local Sanhedrin: your pastor, your bishop, your priest. This is not where Jesus is telling us to find the deliverance we are asking for. This is the deeper kingdom-pathway. When you have a need, do not go elsewhere to have that need filled. Go to one place. The Father.

And one foundational older brother in our tradition pointed out something about the Greek grammar here that I have never been able to forget. *The verbs* ask, *seek, and* knock *in Matthew 7:7* are all in the present-active-imperative tense, meaning they carry the sense of continual action. *Not* ask once and stop. *Not* seek for a season and then give up. *Not* knock briefly and walk away. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. *The Greek grammar itself is encoding* persistent, sustained, ongoing pursuit. And we will see, in the very next chapter of Matthew, what this looks like when an unusual person actually puts it into practice. *Hold that thought.*

Everyone Who Asks

And notice the *unconditional* nature of Jesus's promise:

"For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:8).

Everyone. Every single human being who asks, who seeks, who knocks. There are no qualifications. No screening criteria. No tribal limitations. No nationality requirements. No worthiness assessments. Everyone. That is the most generous promise in the entire Sermon on the Mount, and it stands in dramatic contrast to the traditional-righteousness exclusivity of verse

6. Verse 6 had said: don't give what is holy to the dogs. Verse 8 says: everyone who asks receives. And the tension between those two verses is the chapter's central pivot. Hold that tension in your mind. We will resolve it in a few moments through the Canaanite woman.

And here is what the everyone promise does not mean. It does not mean that every specific request I make is granted exactly as I formulate it. I have prayed for healings that did not come. Every honest Christian has. I have prayed for circumstances to change that did not change. Every honest Christian has. The promise of Matthew 7:8 is not a guarantee that the cosmic vending machine will dispense whatever item we tap in. The promise is deeper than that. Everyone who continues to ask, seek, and knock will, in the end, receive what God knows they actually need. Sometimes what God knows we need is different from what we have specifically requested. And the discovery of that difference is one of the most important parts of our long walk with him.

Have you ever prayed for the healing of a loved one and not received it? Most of us have. Did you nevertheless discover something about God through that unanswered prayer? And did the loved one who suffered also discover something about God in the midst of the suffering? Almost always, yes. The unanswered prayer becomes a different kind of answered prayer. Not the answer we asked for. But a deeper answer that we could not have known to ask for.

A person who approaches God in faith (who keeps giving only their adoration and trust to him, despite uncertain circumstances) discovers something about God and about themselves in the trouble. I know this because I have known it about myself. There have been times when I prayed for something that did not happen, that I really needed to happen. And the circumstance went the opposite direction from what I was asking for. And I railed and raged against God for a season. I was doing my own Psalm 22:1: my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are

you so far from hearing me? And then I went through the season. And then on the other side of it, I started to see what God had been doing through the very thing I had asked him to prevent.

Let me give you a concrete example. I had two trees in my backyard that were splitting under their own weight. A few weeks ago, I cut one of them back very hard. Heavy, aggressive pruning. I removed a substantial percentage of the canopy. And I was uncertain whether the tree would survive the pruning. It looked, in the immediate aftermath, like I might have killed it. And then this morning, I went out and saw: a green branch. New growth coming back, just a few weeks after the pruning. The thing that is going to save the tree and make it last another ten years is the heavy pruning job that reduced the weight on its weak branches. Without the pruning, the tree was going to split itself in half within a season. With the pruning, it is going to last another decade.

That is what happens to us when we keep asking, seeking, and knocking even through seasons when the immediate request seems to be answered with the opposite of what we wanted. God is pruning us for the longer durability. And the green branch eventually comes back. Sometimes it takes weeks. Sometimes years. But it comes. Because the One we are asking, seeking, and knocking with is faithful.

The Drumbeat of Giving

And now look at how Matthew 7 concludes the *ask-seek-knock* section. Jesus draws an a-fortiori argument from the analogy of human fathers:

> Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! (Matthew 7:9–11)

Even the most reprobate fathers among us know how to give bread instead of stones, fish instead of serpents. If even fallen human fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more does the Father give good gifts to his children?

And now look at the word that keeps recurring across the entire passage from Matthew 7:6 to Matthew 7:11. Give. Watch how often it appears. Give not that which is holy. Ask, and it shall be given to you. Everyone who asks receives. What man will give his son a stone? Will he give him a serpent? Your evil-by-nature fathers know how to give good gifts. How much more will your Father give good things to those who ask. Five appearances of the verb to give in six verses. The whole passage is a drumbeat of giving.

And what we discover at the end of the drumbeat is that the giving is overwhelmingly God's giving toward us. We ask, and he gives. We seek, and he gives. We knock, and he gives. The deeper kingdom-pathway underneath the warning about not giving holy things to dogs is the discovery that the Father is the great giver, and the right response to a great giver is to keep asking, seeking, and knocking until the giving has saturated every corner of our lives.

The Golden Summary

And the section reaches its climax in what we call *the Golden Rule*:

"Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

Therefore (whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them) for this is the Law and the Prophets. Most commentators read this verse as a one-off summary of the entire Sermon on the Mount, hanging at the end of the section. I actually believe it is the thing that pulls together everything Matthew 7:6 through 11 has been saying.

The giving God who gives to his children when they ask, seek, and knock, that giving characteristic of God now becomes a characteristic of us. When we give to others what we ourselves would want, what God himself has been giving to us, something is fulfilled in us that no other practice can fulfill. There is a miracle that takes place when we give. Sometimes we give out of our lack: out of seasons when we ourselves are still asking, seeking, and knocking and have not yet received what we have been asking for. And the miracle is that the giving-while-we-still-have-very-little is the very thing that opens us to receive more.

The fundamental basis of the Law and the Prophets (everything Jesus has been summarizing across Matthew 5, 6, and 7) comes down to this. Do to others. Give to others. Give to others what you would have given to you. Because this is the fundamental characteristic of the God we serve. For God so loved the world that He gave (John 3:16). Just stop right there. God's defining act is giving. And if we so love the world, we will also give. The same word. The same verb. The same direction. God gives to us. We give to others. The chain extends from the Father through us into the world.

> And later in Matthew's Gospel, this comes back as the great summary of the Law:
>
> Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37–40)

Love God. Love your neighbor. Those two commandments contain everything else. And the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12 is the practical application of the second great commandment. Treat others the way the Father has treated you. Give to others the way the Father has given to

you. That is the kingdom-pathway out of the dog-and-swine trampling that the world-systems perpetually impose on what is holy.

False Prophets, Trees That Bear No Fruit

And the chapter then moves into a warning about *false prophets*:

> Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (Matthew 7:15–20)

Wolves in sheep's clothing. That is who the false prophets are. *They look like sheep on the outside.* They are inside the assembly. They wear the right clothing. They use the right vocabulary. *And inside, they are wolves.* And the diagnostic for distinguishing the wolves from the sheep is *fruit-inspection. What is this tree actually producing?*

Now, and this is critical for the chapter's pastoral landing, Jesus is talking about prophetic figures here, not about every neighbor we meet. The wolves-in-sheep's-clothing warning is specifically about those who claim prophetic authority and exercise it falsely. It is not a warning against every individual we might disagree with on a side-issue. And modern Christianity has sometimes weaponized the verse to justify cutting off relationships with people we have already decided are not worth our time. That is not what the verse is doing. The verse is about discernment regarding those who claim to speak for God. Not about whom to share the gospel with.

And the way we sometimes turn do not cast your pearls before swine into an I am not sharing with that person rule reveals how easily traditional righteousness can become a justification for exclusion. Yet the entire New Testament tells us that Jesus was a friend of publicans and sinners. He continually went to those who were down and out and on the periphery. He did not refuse to give the pearl to those his society had categorized as swine. He gave the pearl freely. And the categorization-of-swine was undone by the giving.

Israel as the Wolves Who Looked Like Sheep

And to drive the point home, Matthew 15 picks up the same warning and applies it directly to *the religious establishment of Israel*. Listen to the parallel passage:

> Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:1–3)

Why do you transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? That is the wolves-in-sheep's-clothing diagnostic being applied to the religious establishment of Israel. The scribes and Pharisees look like sheep: They are inside the religious community, they wear the right vestments, they keep the right ritual observances. But Jesus is naming them as wolves in sheep's clothing because their traditions have begun to displace the very commandments their traditions were supposed to protect.

And then Jesus quotes Isaiah at them:

"These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8–9, quoting Isaiah 29:13).

Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. That is one of the deepest dangers to the people of God across every generation, that we will start to believe our own press and think we no longer have a need for a Savior. We can start to believe we have arrived. That we are two worlds in a day. That our particular religious tradition is the one God has been waiting for. Help us, Lord.

And let me say something carefully here. I am still working on getting the plank out of my own eye (cf. Matthew 7:3–5). I do not have permission to start pointing at the splinters in everyone else's. But I will say this: There are some splinters in the eye of modern-day Christianity that need to be allowed to be washed out by the Lord, just as I am allowing him to work on my plank. And the way to do that is not to first run around correcting other people's splinters. It is to keep working on my own plank. While I do that, the Lord can help others work on theirs. Let us be gracious people who recognize: God, thank you for just a glimpse, an opening, a parting of the clouds for me to see just enough to take the next step. Because God knows, I came a long way under the traditions I was formed in. God gave me a framework to work from in those traditions, and he is going to use everything I have inherited to get me to the next level. And ten thousand generations from now, somebody is going to get up and speak on Matthew 7, and they will say (you have heard it said, but I say to you) and they will have some new insight for their day that leads them to a new understanding and a new grounding in what it means to be the righteous people of God. That is the long generational arc of the Spirit's work. Be gracious to your forebears. Be gracious to your contemporaries. And let God do his ongoing work.

The Canaanite Woman

Now look at what Jesus does immediately after the wolves-in-sheep's-clothing exchange in Matthew 15. Matthew has structured this section deliberately, so that what comes next functions as a dramatic illustration of everything Matthew 7 has been teaching.

> Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." But He answered her not a word. (Matthew 15:21–23)

Jesus leaves Israel and goes north into Gentile territory. Tyre and Sidon: the Phoenician coastal cities the Old Testament prophets had repeatedly denounced for their corruption (Isaiah 23, Ezekiel 26–28). If you read Ezekiel's judgment on Tyre, you come away thinking there is no hope for anyone from Tyre. From here to eternity, there is no hope. But Jesus walks across the border into Tyre's territory. He goes to the place the prophets had written off.

And a Canaanite woman comes out crying. The very word Canaanite would have set off alarm bells for any Jewish listener: Canaanite was the ancient enemy-category, the very nation Israel had been commanded to dispossess from the land under Joshua. And here is a Canaanite. From Tyre. A woman. With a demon-possessed daughter. Every category of social, religious, ethnic, and gender exclusion is stacked against her. And she comes asking for help.

And look at Jesus's initial response. He answered her not a word. Silence. The Master of the open ear and the responsive heart does not respond to her petition. And the disciples grow impatient. Send her away, they say. She is bothering us with her crying. Jesus says, but only after some time of silence, I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24). That is the traditional-righteousness response. She is a Gentile. A Canaanite. A dog, in

the symbolic vocabulary of Psalm 22. The holy things are not for her. That is what verse 6 of Matthew 7 had said.

But notice what the woman does. She does not leave. She does not give up. She does exactly what Matthew 7:7 had said to do: she keeps asking, she keeps seeking, she keeps knocking. Continual-action verbs. And she has stumbled, by faith, into the deeper kingdom-pathway that Jesus was teaching in Matthew 7.

"Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, 'Lord, help me!'" (Matthew 15:25).

Lord, help me. Two of the most beautiful words a human being can pray. Help me. Sometimes that is all it takes. Whoever seeks finds. Whoever knocks, it is opened. And she has just knocked again, with two words. Help me.

And then Jesus tests her one more time:

> But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." (Matthew 15:26–27)

It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs. Jesus is testing her on the very vocabulary of Matthew 7:6. Are you not one of the dogs to whom the holy things are not given? And her response is breathtaking:

Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Yes, Lord. I am a dog. I do not deny my condition. I do not deny my place in this community as the woman with no husband and a demon-possessed daughter. I am all that you say I am. And yet, the crumbs from the master's table are enough for me. I am not asking for a place at the children's table. I am asking for what falls from the table. The little dogs can have the crumbs. And the crumbs are still bread from the master's hand.

That confession opens the door. The honest acknowledgment of her position (not the denial of it, but the embracing of it as the very condition out of which she could still ask, seek, and knock) is what Jesus had been looking for all along. And his response:

"Then Jesus answered and said to her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour" (Matthew 15:28).

Great is your faith. That phrase (great faith, megalē pistis in Greek) is used in Matthew's Gospel exclusively for Gentiles. The Canaanite woman here in Matthew 15. The Roman centurion back in Matthew 8. Two Gentiles. Two great-faith commendations. And the disciples, the inner circle of Jewish disciples Jesus has been walking with for months, get called little-faith over and over and over across the same Gospel.

The Surprise of the Kingdom

The surprise of the kingdom is that what was traditionally categorized as the dogs and the swine sometimes turns out to be the sheep. Among the Gentiles, among the foreigners, among the categorically-excluded; there are sheep. The Canaanite woman from Tyre is a sheep. The Roman centurion who never set foot in a synagogue except possibly as an occupying officer: is a sheep. And the religious establishment of Israel, the wolves in sheep's clothing, turn out, in too many cases, to be the wolves.

And this should fundamentally change how we approach the people we are tempted to write off. Let us not be too quick to label. Let us not be the people who pull verse 6 of Matthew 7 out of its context and use it as a justification for excluding the very people Jesus would have walked across borders to reach. Let us be the Jesus-people who go through life with the simple question (but he speaks truth, doesn't he?) and let the Spirit show us the sheep we would not have recognized as sheep on our own.

The sheep are out there, in places we have been categorically writing off. The Gentile officer of the occupying army. The Canaanite woman from the city the prophets denounced. The publican at the tax booth. The Samaritan at the well. The prostitute weeping at his feet. The thief on the next cross. Every category Jesus's contemporaries had written off, Jesus walked into and found a sheep waiting. And we are called to walk into the same categories with the same expectation.

North, South, East, West

And the great prophetic anticipation of all of this comes back in Jesus's response to the centurion in Matthew 8, the parallel Gentile great-faith story. Listen:

> And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:11–12)

Many will come from east and west. The whole world. Beyond Israel. And they will sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. The dogs that the traditional wisdom had categorically excluded will turn out to be the table-companions of the patriarchs. And the sons of the kingdom, those whose inheritance had seemed secured by birth and lineage, can find themselves cast out, if they have rejected the very King their tradition was supposed to be preparing them to recognize.

And the Great Commission at the end of Matthew makes the universal trajectory explicit:

> Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19–20)

All the nations. Every creature. That is the dispatch order of the kingdom. And the nations include those that Psalm 22 had called dogs. They include the cities Isaiah and Ezekiel had denounced. They include the categories of human community that the traditional Jewish vocabulary had marked as outside. All of them, every one, included in the gospel's reach.

The Lion and the Lamb

And the eschatological consummation of this universal reach comes back in Isaiah, in one of the most beloved passages of the Old Testament:

> The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6–9)

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb. The lion shall eat straw like the ox. The child shall play at the cobra's hole. And here is what Isaiah is not literally describing. He is not talking about animals. He is talking about people. The wolf-people, the lion-people, the cobra-people of the surrounding nations (the dogs of Psalm 22, the swine of Matthew 7) they are going to lie down at the same table as the lamb-people of restored Israel. And the cosmic peace that Isaiah is describing is the peace of an integrated people of God drawn from every category the dragon had labeled as enemy.

How does this happen? It happens because people who come in open, who see and believe in God, who ask and seek and knock, receive the kingdom of God. They receive all there

is. And the woman who, by the traditional reading of the law, was a dog from Tyre, finds the mercy of God and becomes a sheep in the kingdom. I do not know about you, but that inspires me. That changes how I look at every person I might be tempted to write off. It changes how I read the headlines of every nation I might be tempted to write off. It changes how I read the histories of every category of human community the traditional vocabulary had written off. Because the table of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is going to be filled with people coming from north, south, east, and west, and the Father is going to be hosting them all.

Give

And so the chapter closes back where it started, with giving. Whatever you would have men do to you, do also to them. For this is the Law and the Prophets. Give what you would receive. Give what the Father has given to you. Give the pearl freely to whoever will receive it. Give the holy thing to whoever will treat it as holy. And do not be too quick to label anyone as a dog or as a swine, because the very ones you have written off may turn out to be the Canaanite woman from Tyre, knocking at the door, saying (Lord, help me) and waiting for you to bring her the crumbs from the master's table.

There is a miracle that takes place when we give. Sometimes, most of the time, out of our lack. Sometimes the gift to someone else turns out to be the very thing that opens our own door to receive. We are constantly asking, seeking, knocking, and we are constantly being given to, even when we cannot quite see the giving as it happens. And the right response is to keep the chain of giving moving outward. From the Father, to us, through us, to whoever needs the next gift. That is the rhythm of the kingdom. And it does not stop, generation after generation, until the wolf is dwelling with the lamb and the lion is eating straw like the ox and the dogs of Psalm 22 are sitting at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Give. Ask. Seek. Knock. And give again. For this is the Law and the Prophets, and this is what the Father has been doing through his Son toward us, and this is what we are now called to do through his Spirit toward the world.