

Was Jesus “Cruel” to Gentiles?

Introduction

One of the intriguing items about Jesus’ ministry is that during his time on the earth, his mission was to spread the gospel to **Jews** – not to Gentiles. In addition, Jesus also instructed his *disciples* to only preach to Jews – not to Gentiles. For example, consider the following passages:

Matthew 15:24 (ESV):

²⁴ He [Jesus] answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Matthew 10:5-6 (ESV):

⁵ These twelve [disciples] Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

That fact is rather surprising to some Christians – because some people assume that Jesus spread the gospel to *everyone*, during his ministry on the earth.

Of course, **after** Jesus died and was resurrected, he then instructed the apostles to spread the gospel to *everyone* – Jews and Gentiles. For example:

Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV):

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Mark 16:15-16 (ESV):

¹⁵ He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

So, during Jesus’ earthly ministry, he was only sent to Jews – but after he was resurrected, he sent the apostles to all nations. The reason for this is that God’s plan of salvation was evidently designed to be spread to Jews *first* – and *then* to Gentiles. The apostle Paul mentions that fact:

Romans 1:16 (ESV):

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

As a result, Jesus was fulfilling God’s plan of salvation, by spreading the gospel to Jews *first* – and *after* that having it spread to Gentiles.

The Encounter with the Gentile Woman

In some cases, people have “taken issue” with Jesus only spreading the gospel to Jews. In particular, some people have claimed that Jesus *only* “cared” about Jews during his ministry – and in fact, that he was actually **cruel** to Gentiles during that time.

The **one** example that is *always* used, to try to demonstrate Jesus’ supposed cruelty, is the encounter that Jesus had with a Gentile woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon. The two parallel accounts of that event exist in Matthew 15 and Mark 7. Here is the account in Matthew:

Matthew 15:21-28 (ESV):

²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Some people claim that the above passage portrays Jesus as extremely rude – and even “heartless” – towards Gentiles. That, in turn, has prevented some people from feeling any sort of “closeness” to Jesus; i.e., it has caused some people to view Jesus as a very distant figure, who does not really “care” about Gentiles very much.

There are two overall issues that are usually brought up about the above passage, to try to prove that Jesus was cruel towards Gentiles:

- Jesus did not heal the woman’s daughter **immediately** – instead, he required the woman to ask him *multiple* times, before he healed her.
- Jesus referred to Gentiles as “dogs” – which was a common term of derision that Jews used to describe Gentiles.

So, let’s examine Scripture, to investigate the context of the above passage. That should allow us to determine if Jesus was *actually* being cruel to the Gentile woman or not.

The Importance of Persistence

As mentioned above, Jesus did not heal the Gentile woman’s daughter immediately; instead, he required her to ask him multiple times. In other words, he required the woman to **persist** in her requests.

As it turns out, one of the items that Jesus emphasized – many times – is that it is important for everyone to be **persistent** in our requests to God! That is, we should *not* expect that a single, quick request to God will be immediately answered – instead, we should be prepared to make ongoing, patient requests to God.

One of the more well-known passages which demonstrates this “persistence in prayer” concept is the parable of The Persistent Widow:

Luke 18:1-8 (ESV):

1 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

There are numerous other examples – throughout Scripture – which demonstrate the importance of being *persistent* in our requests.

However, there is one very famous passage in Scripture, which – at first glance – **appears** to *contradict* this “persistence in prayer” concept. That passage is the often-quoted “ask and you shall receive” passage, in Matthew 7. Here is the translation of that passage from the ESV:

Matthew 7:7-8 (ESV):

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

With the above translation, one might *assume* that our requests to God will be fulfilled “instantly” – so that we only have to make a request once, and then God will *immediately* act upon it. Of course, if that is the case, then that would *contradict* all of Jesus’ other teachings, which state that we need to **persist** in our requests. So, what is going on in the above passage?

It turns out that the Greek verbs in that passage are in the “present imperative” tense – which indicates *continuous* actions, rather than “one-time events”. As a result, it appears to be much more accurate to translate the first words in that verse as “**keep asking**” rather than as “ask”. A few English translations – such as the ISV, HCSB, and CJB – translate the passage that way. Here is the ISV translation:

Matthew 7:7-8 (ISV):

⁷ “Keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸ Because everyone who keeps asking will receive, and the person who keeps searching will find, and the person who keeps knocking will have the door opened.

So, even that famous passage is actually *demonstrating* the importance of persistence!

As a result, it is not surprising that Jesus required the Gentile woman to **persist** in her requests – because Jesus repeatedly tells us that *everyone* – Jew and Gentile – needs to be persistent in our requests!

The use of “Harsh Words”

The **other** main item that is brought up about the “Gentile woman” passage is the fact that Jesus referred to Gentiles as “dogs”, when the woman asked for his help. Since the term “dogs” is a negative term, some people claim that this proves that Jesus did not “care” about Gentiles at all.

In order for that premise to be true, it would have to be the case that Jesus never used negative terms about **Jews**. In other words, if Jesus only used negative terms about Gentiles – and never used them about Jews – then that may indicate some “favoritism” towards Jews.

So, let’s examine Scripture, to see if Jesus ever used negative terms about his fellow Jews. First, consider the following passage, in which Jesus is describing some Jewish people:

Matthew 23:23-24,33 (ESV):

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”

In the above passage, Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites”, “blind guides”, “serpents”, and a “brood of vipers”. Those are certainly very *negative* terms...

Of course, it is true that many of the scribes and Pharisees were *enemies* of Jesus. As a result, some people may assert that Jesus only used negative terms about Gentiles, and about Jews who were his enemies – i.e., that he would *never* use negative terms about Jews who were his **friends**.

So, consider the following passage – in which Jesus talks to one of his *closest friends*:

Matthew 16:21-23 (ESV):

²¹ From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Did you notice the term that Jesus used for Peter? He called Peter **Satan!** Is there any term that is *more* “negative” than that?

From the above examples, we can see that on various occasions, Jesus used “harsh words” for everyone – Jews *and* Gentiles, friends *and* enemies. His apparent purpose in doing so was to “provoke a response” in people – i.e., to get a person’s attention, and to thereby cause the person to *respond* appropriately. For example, Jesus called Peter “Satan” to try to get him to realize the serious sin of *opposing* God’s plans.

In the case of the Gentile woman, Jesus was apparently “testing her faith”. In other words, the reason why he referred to her as a “dog” was to get her to *demonstrate* the faith she had in him. Basically, if the

woman had *not* had very much faith in Jesus, then she might have become “insulted” by him referring to Gentiles as dogs – and in that case, she might have stopped asking him for help. The fact that she **persisted** in requesting his help demonstrated that she had great faith – and that is precise response that Jesus was trying to elicit!

So, the fact that Jesus referred to the Gentile woman as a “dog” does not have *anything to do* with him being “cruel” to her. Instead, he was using that “harsh language” to *elicit a response* from her – in the exact same way as he used “harsh language” with Jews.

Other Passages to Consider:

There are many other passages in Scripture, which demonstrate that Jesus did not harbor any “favoritism” towards Jews. First, consider the “10 lepers” passage, below:

Luke 17:11-19 (ESV):

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” ¹⁴ When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

As shown in the above passage, ten men who had leprosy asked Jesus for healing – and he healed them all. Only one of them came back and thanked Jesus – and that one man was a Samaritan. So, this demonstrates that Jesus healed everyone – Jew and Gentile – without favoritism.

Now, consider a very famous parable that Jesus gave – the “Good Samaritan”:

Luke 10:29-37 (ESV):

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

In the above passage, Jesus *explicitly indicates* that Samaritans should be considered as “neighbors” to Jews! This was a rather “incendiary” statement for Jesus to make – because at that time, many Jews **hated** Samaritans. So, the fact that Jesus directed Jews to love Samaritans *definitively* indicates that he did not harbor any “favoritism” towards Jews.

One Final Example

Even after reading all of the above information, some people *still* may not be “convinced” about Jesus’ feelings about Gentiles. That is, some people may still think that Jesus “favored” Jews over Gentiles.

If Jesus actually *did* favor Jews over Gentiles, then it stands to reason that he would **never** praise a Gentile *over* a Jew. In other words, if Jesus did have such favoritism, then he would *never* make any statements which indicated that a Gentile was following God more closely than a Jew was.

With the above information in mind, consider the following passage, in which Jesus interacts with a Gentile:

Matthew 8:5-13 (ESV):

⁵When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, ⁶“Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” ⁷And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” ⁸But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” ¹⁰When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

As shown, Jesus *explicitly states* that the Gentile centurion’s faith is greater than **any** Jew’s faith! He goes on to state that in the Kingdom, many Gentiles will be honored – *and* that many Jews will be “barred” from the Kingdom.

This definitely indicates to me that Jesus did not have even the *slightest bit* of “favoritism” towards Jews...

Conclusion

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, he only spread the gospel to Jews – not to Gentiles. This was part of God’s overall plan – that the Jews would receive the gospel first – and then after that it would be spread to Gentiles.

Despite that fact, Jesus still *healed* Gentiles when they asked for help. He also indicated – even at that time – that Gentiles were “neighbors” of Jews – and therefore, that Jews needed to *love* Gentiles, rather than to hate them.

The one example of the Gentile woman from Tyre and Sidon is an example of Jesus using “harsh words”, to *elicit a response*. In that case, Jesus used harsh words to get the woman to demonstrate her faith.

Finally, note that from the very beginning, God’s plan *always* included the gospel being spread to Gentiles – through Jesus. One of the passages which indicates this is the prophecy that the priest Simeon made, when he met the baby Jesus:

Luke 2:27-32 (ESV):

²⁷ And he [Simeon] came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation

³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

Simeon declares that Jesus is to be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” – and this is long before Jesus’ death and resurrection. This indicates that it was always part of God’s plan for the gospel to be spread – through Jesus – to Gentiles.