

JESUS BLESSES THE FAITH OF A CANAANITE WOMAN

Matthew 15:21-39

Key Verse: 15:28

“Then Jesus answered, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour.”

Matthew’s gospel is commonly regarded as the gospel for the Jews. Yet in today’s passage, Matthew records that a Canaanite woman came to Jesus, breaking through all barriers to obtain Jesus’ blessing. She could do so because of her great faith. After that event, Jesus blessed a crowd of people by healing their sick and even feeding them when they were hungry. This event reminds us of an earlier event in which Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. But there is a significant difference in this event. The crowd seems to be largely made up of Gentiles. Jesus blesses the Gentiles too. Today let’s learn how to have great faith that obtains Jesus’ blessing.

First, a Canaanite woman’s tearful plea (21-22).

Look at verse 21. “Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.” Jesus had been at Gennesaret in Galilee. There Jesus had confronted the Jewish leaders for breaking the command of God for the sake of their tradition. Jesus did not argue endlessly about the matter. Jesus knew that his conflict with the Jewish leaders would have but one conclusion: his death on the cross. It would happen in due time. First, Jesus wanted to spend time with his disciples and help them understand and accept the main point of his teachings. Jesus went to the region of Tyre and Sidon, Gentile territory, to withdraw from public service and spend time with them. Tyre was about 30 miles north and west of Capernaum, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Sidon was another 25 miles north of Tyre.

Look at verse 22. “A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.’” It seems that by and large the Gentile people left Jesus alone. But there was one woman who came to him with a loud cry. She was a Canaanite woman. In the Old Testament, the Canaanites were the bitter enemies of the Israelites. They derived their name from Canaan, the son of Ham, whom Noah cursed. They occupied the promised land. When the Israelites conquered the land under General Joshua, they fought and defeated the Canaanites. Canaanite people were regarded as cursed people and they were known to be idol worshiping people.

However, this Canaanite woman was different from the stereotype. She came to Jesus crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.” She called Jesus “Lord,” showing her respect and submission to him. She acknowledged Jesus as the Son of David, the promised Messiah. Obviously, what Jesus had done in Israel—healing the sick and driving out demons—came to be known in Gentile territory. This woman came to Jesus for help. She believed in Jesus’ mercy and in Jesus’ power to meet her need.

What was her problem? She said, “My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.” Here we can learn two things from her. First, she was a good mother. Her daughter was suffering from demon possession. But she did not cry out to Jesus, saying, “Have mercy on my daughter,” but she said, “Have mercy on me.” It was because she was suffering together with her daughter. The two were one, not only in the time of joy and success, but also in the time of great suffering. When her daughter experienced spiritual and emotional torment from demon possession, her mother felt the same pain and even more. Some parents are happy to love their children when they do well in school and bring honor to the family. But when a child becomes demon possessed and exhibits disgusting behavior, any parent will feel shame. At such a time a good parent will love their child all the more and help them to the point of death. As the Roman centurion in chapter 8 was a man of deep humanity, so this Canaanite woman was a woman of deep humanity. There is no question that the development of a noble character is essential in laying the foundation to be a man or woman of faith.

Second, she was a woman of spiritual insight who knew the problem correctly. She saw clearly that her daughter was demon possessed. She was a three-dimensional woman who saw spiritual reality. When we see spiritual reality we do not engage in fruitless human struggle. Rather, we can struggle against the real enemy, Satan. Paul said, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).

Second, Jesus blesses the woman's faith (23-29).

The Canaanite woman stood before Jesus, with tears running down her cheeks, pleading for her suffering daughter. She was a woman of faith who came to Jesus for mercy. We might expect Jesus to respond quickly to her, as he did to so many others. But this time Jesus' reaction surprises us. Look at verses 23-24. "Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, 'Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.'" It is indeed striking that Jesus did not answer a word. To any man, a woman's tears are an irresistible weapon. Many a strong and courageous man has been completely melted by a crying woman. But Jesus was not moved by this woman's tears. Jesus did not answer a word. Even so, the woman did not give up. She kept crying out to Jesus for help. She cried so much that the disciples began to be embarrassed by the situation and they tried to intercede with Jesus.

Look again at verse 24. Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Here we can learn Jesus' absolute obedience to God and his love for the people of Israel. Jesus knew how much the Canaanite woman was suffering. Jesus knew her daughter's situation fully. Yet Jesus was steadfast in his obedience to God's will. As the Messiah, he was sent to the people of Israel. This was a theme of the Old Testament. St. Paul summarized it in Romans 15:8, saying, "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs...." Jesus had come to fulfill God's promises to his people. So many times in Matthew's gospel the word "fulfill" is used. This teaches us that Jesus' ministry was prophesied by God, planned by God and fulfilled by God. Jesus was obedient to the will of God as the Messiah sent by God.

Therefore, Jesus was faithful to the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus had suffered so much to serve the people of Israel. Jesus had worked hard without rest to drive out demons, heal the sick and teach the word of God. Jesus had confronted the religious leaders at the risk of his life. Jesus had done his best to serve the people of Israel. But they did not accept him as the Messiah. They had rejected him and spoken ill of him. Still Jesus would go to them again and again, and finally he would die on the cross for them. How easy it would have been to abandon them and go to the Gentiles, who would believe in him and repent. Yet Jesus did not compromise his obedience to the will of God for a successful ministry among the Gentiles. Sometimes God's servants are tempted to find an easier mission field. But we learn from Jesus to stand firm in the mission field God has called us to as our obedience to God. What a challenge this is to the "felt needs" approach to ministry. There was not a stronger felt need than the one presented before Jesus at this time. But Jesus did not react to felt needs. Jesus obeyed the will of God for him with an absolute attitude. No doubt, this attitude was planted in Jesus' disciples' hearts through this event. They learned to persevere with suffering to reach the people God called them to rather than doing what seemed easier.

The woman heard Jesus' words. It sounded as if Jesus was not going to help her and he had a valid reason before God for not doing so. How did the woman respond to Jesus' words? She came and knelt before Jesus and said, "Lord, help me!" She was in a deep dilemma. She desperately needed help for her demon possessed daughter. She could not stop asking help for her daughter. At the same time she respected Jesus as the Lord and he had seemed to disregard her plea. She did not know how to interpret what he said. But she believed he could help her. Now she came to him, not for her daughter, but to solve her own inner conflict. She knelt before him and submitted herself to him and asked for help. Here we learn how to respond when prayers are not answered in the way we would like and we cannot understand what Jesus is doing. We must come to Jesus with our inner conflict and surrender to him as the only one who can help us. Jesus' disciples could not help this woman. But she believed Jesus could help her. When no one else can help us, Jesus can.

Though the woman demonstrates remarkable faith, Jesus said something that was hard for her to accept. Look at verse 26. "He answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.'" In saying this, Jesus meant that the Jews were the children of God. God had called them his firstborn son. Jesus compared himself to the children's bread. Jesus is the bread from heaven who came down to feed the souls of the people of Israel. Jesus' Bible teaching had brought healing to their souls. Jesus' Bible teaching had brought truth to their empty hearts. Jesus' words had given direction and purpose and hope when there was none in the world. This blessing was given to the people of Israel. In spite of their poor response, Jesus had not given up on them. God's heart was still broken for them. God was still willing to bless them and to fulfill all of his promises through them. In comparison the Gentiles were like dogs. It is interesting that the word Jesus uses here is from a Greek form that means a decent, domesticated pet dog like "Happy" at the UIC Bible house, or "Nina" at the NU prayer house. It did not refer to a

wild dog that would wander in the garbage heaps and spread diseases. Though Jesus compared the Gentiles to dogs, he compared them to the best kinds of dogs. Nevertheless, these dogs had no right to sit at the table with the children and enjoy a meal. Jesus was very clear about doing God's will in a way that pleased God.

To the woman, it was a difficult teaching to hear. It meant that Jesus was personally calling her a "dog." Most people realize that speaking badly of a woman by calling her a dog is likely to result in a major blow-up. According to her woman's nature, she could have gotten up from where she was, turned her shoulders from Jesus and said, "Humph. I will show you." Then she could have gone out and collaborated with the Pharisees to work against Jesus.

What did she do? Look at verse 28. "'Yes, Lord,' she said, 'but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'" Her first words here were, "Yes, Lord." She fully accepted Jesus' words regarding the sovereign will of God in his salvation plan. If Jesus said she was a dog, she was ready to regard herself a dog. She had awesome respect for Jesus and she was a truly humble woman. There was nothing in her that reacted to Jesus' words. Rather, she accepted his words absolutely. When she had such a humble attitude toward Jesus, she was free from emotional turmoil. She could think clearly and her wisdom was sparkling like the stars in the sky. She said, "...but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She found hope even in a dog's situation. The dogs under the table can eat the children's crumbs. This woman accepted her position as a Gentile woman. She knew who she was before God. But she believed that Jesus' blessing was so rich and abundant that even a crumb of blessing was more than enough to meet her need.

Jesus was moved by the woman's faith. He said, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." Jesus recognized her faith as great faith. This does not mean that she had a great quantity of faith. It does not mean that she had five gallons of faith while most people have only one pint of faith. Rather it meant that her faith was excellent in quality and it was constant and steady. Though it had been tested, she had shown herself to trust in Jesus without changing from the beginning to the end. She acknowledged Jesus as the Lord even when it meant that her daughter seemed to be disregarded and she herself was called a dog. Her faith was wholly and fully in Jesus himself and in his mercy, power, and goodness. This was the faith that pleased Jesus. This is the kind of faith we need to learn.

There are so many demon possessed young daughters in our land today. They engage in outrageous behavior that shocks their parents and people around them. It is easy to blame them and avoid responsibility for them. But we learn from this woman that we must regard them as our own dear daughters and take their problems as our own. We must come to Jesus in prayer for them until Jesus is pleased with our faith. Then Jesus will heal them. May Jesus heal many suffering daughters through our faith that prays.

Third, Jesus blesses many Gentiles (29-39).

Look at verse 29. "Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down." It is hard to get the geographical imagery from this verse. But when we compare with Mark's gospel, it is clear that Jesus went down the east side of the Sea of Galilee in the area of the Decapolis. This was known as Gentile territory. It was there that Jesus had healed two demon-possessed men at the cost of the town's pig business. At that time, the people of the region rejected Jesus. But now he returns there and the response is quite different. Look at verse 30. "Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them." Perhaps the news of Jesus' healing the demon possessed men had borne this good fruit. Or perhaps the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter led many people to come to Jesus. In either case, great crowds of people, mostly Gentile people, came to Jesus with all their sick and needy. And Jesus healed them all. When the people saw this they praised the God of Israel. They saw God in Jesus and accepted the love of God. They saw the power of God in Jesus and praised the God of Israel for his love and power.

In verses 31-39, Jesus feeds the crowd of people before sending them away. This event is similar to the event in chapter 14. Jesus had compassion on them. Jesus challenged his disciples to help him feed them by finding what they had to offer. Jesus accepted their seven loaves and multiplied them until they could feed four thousand men plus women and children. The similarity with the previous event tells us that Jesus' compassion for the Gentiles mirrored his compassion for the Jews. The differences tell us that it was indeed a different event. We find that the disciples were making some progress this time, for they responded with a little more cooperation and hope than the previous time. Also, this time there were seven basketfuls of broken pieces left over. This may correspond to the

seven loaves that they offered and teach them that they will be blessed in proportion to the measure that they give. In any case, Jesus' compassion for the Gentiles is overflowing. Though Jesus went first to the Jews, he treated the Gentiles with the same compassion and grace as he had treated the Jews. Jesus is indeed the God of compassion and the King of the Jews who saves all the Gentiles who believe in him.

In this passage we learned Jesus' compassion for the Gentiles. We also learn that Jesus blesses faith that is steadfastly focused on him. Let's humble ourselves before Jesus and acknowledge him as the Sovereign Lord and ask his mercy and help on all our suffering daughters.