

What Great Faith Does When Unbelief Will Not

Matthew 15:21-28

In Matthew 15 we're introduced to a Canaanite woman - that is, a Gentile - someone who is not an Israelite at all, and yet someone, clearly, who knows more and understands better than most of the Israelites the things of God.

There are three things about Jesus that this woman understands very well, and she's fully persuaded that they're true: (1) She believes that Jesus is the Lord, the mighty Maker of heaven and earth; (2) She believes that He is David's greater Son, the long-awaited Messiah who has come to redeem His people; and (3) She believes that He, as Lord and Messiah, is able to do all things, including heal her demon-possessed daughter.

As a result of such faith, what does she do? In her great need, and with this opportunity before her, she does the most reasonable thing that anyone could possibly do. She does what any loving parent who hopes in the Lord like this would most certainly do. When the Lord Jesus comes into the region where she is, she puts herself on His path, cries out to Him for help, and casts herself on His mercy. What a beautiful picture is presented to us here, and how well it portrays how utterly dependent we all are on the Lord for everything we need!

Only those who know the Lord, of course, will cry out to Him like this with such commitment of faith and steadfast hope. In point of fact, however, everybody needs the Lord for everything - unbelievers do as well, and so, too, even the animals - because it is He who gives to all their food in due season. Surely, this Gentile woman, knowing all this, couldn't do better or wiser than what she does in coming to Jesus for the help that she so desperately needs!

And we expect the Lord Jesus to respond to her cry for help right away, don't we? Ah, but He doesn't. In fact, He does three things which surprise us:

1. Though she cries out from her dire need which is so sorely felt, and though she does so in true faith, at first He answers her not a word. That's right. Jesus doesn't say anything. What's this? Clearly, He's testing her, isn't He?

We're shocked, perhaps, and maybe even a few of us would turn right away ourselves at this point. But she doesn't turn away. No, she's too needy for that. Besides, she didn't come to Jesus just to give up right away, or to turn aside at the least bit of discouragement. Indeed, from what we're told, it would seem that she kept on pleading. Praying with persistence is a virtue, one that we ought to cultivate as a regular habit, and, as the Lord shows us in His Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18), He delights in such prayers! Have you ever prayed that way, believer? Like Jacob, have you ever wrestled with the Lord until dawn, determined not to let go except the Lord should bless you?

Here is another thing that surprises us:

2. Though this woman continues to cry out in her desperation, and though the disciples are anxious to put an end to it, yet to her (and to them) Jesus says only, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” What kind of response is that? At first, notice, He says nothing, and then, when He does speak, He tells her that?

Still, of course, He’s testing her, isn’t He? This, beloved, is how our faith is made better and stronger. The Lord proves our faith, not to destroy it, but to improve it. As with precious metals, He turns up the heat of the fiery furnace in order to consume the dross and to refine the gold. And here are two of the reasons God has given us His Holy Spirit. It is to comfort us in our trials, and that we might pray all the more earnestly. The Spirit, remember, helps us in all our weaknesses. He helps us to make intercession with groanings so deep, so full of passion, that they cannot always be expressed even in words.

Believer, have you ever prayed that way, fervently, with all your heart and soul? Do you think that you wouldn’t be heard if you did pray that way? Not so! James tells us that it is the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man that avails much! Maybe a few more in our number would turn away now, but, once again, not this woman. She’s not nearly finished, not yet, and she’s not about to let this apparent opposition which seems to be mounting to deter her from her mission. She came for help, remember, and she, like Jacob, won’t let go in her struggle unless the Lord should bless her!

Let me explain what I mean when I say “apparent opposition.” The opposition she faces from the Lord Jesus is only apparent, this is what it appears, but it isn’t real. By saying, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus was not refusing her request, or sending her away as the disciples had so thoughtlessly assumed that He would. No, He was merely telling her, rather, that His present ministry, what He was doing right now, was to the Jews, and that only when the Jews, in turn, had rejected Him would He actively seek the Gentiles, calling them also to repentance. The rest of the New Testament makes that clear (see, for example, Rom. 1:16).

This woman is before her time, in other words, but He does not for that reason cast her off, nor does she stop pleading. Oh, that we might learn from this ourselves! Would that Christians everywhere learned to wait on the Lord, to keep waiting and pleading - having prepared our suit, to keep letting our requests be made known unto God - until the Lord (who is working all things together for our good) makes clear what good thing, His own gracious will and glorious purpose, He has ordained for us!

Here now is one more thing that surprises us, and this one perhaps most of all:

3. Though this woman bows down and worships Jesus at His feet, though she cries out in the simplest terms (“Lord, help me!”) when there is nothing else she may say or

do, still, what does He say to her? He tells her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." Wow! At first, He appears to ignore her, and then to reject her, and now finally to insult her. Is our Lord really doing any of that? No, of course not. And we may be sure, beloved, that this Canaanite woman knows exactly what He's talking about when He calls her a dog. She has probably heard it before, or knows, at any rate, that dogs are what many Jews consider Gentiles to be.

The Israelites, you see, considered themselves to be the children of God - as the children of Abraham, according to the flesh, many of them took it for granted that this made them also the children of God - that they had privileged access to God's favour, therefore, whereas Gentiles were but dogs who had no such access.

Now here is Jesus, a Jew, speaking to a Gentile and referring to her, unmistakably, as a dog! Unbelief is incensed by that, isn't it? "Well, I never...!", and with that it turns right away. But real faith (saving faith, which says Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief) responds in an altogether different way. True faith says, "Yes, Lord, You are quite right in what You say, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table."

Faith is humble, you see; in fact, humility is one of its towering attributes. Faith is humble because it knows and concedes the true facts. It says, "Yes, I am a dog. Indeed, considering my wicked heart, how unworthy I am, how weak and prone to sin I am, it's an honour that I should be counted even as a dog! But, here's the thing, do dogs have no sense? Don't they know to run to the master's table whenever the children are eating there in order to pick up the crumbs which fall on the floor?"

That's the thing about dogs, isn't it? They know a good thing when they see it, and they're not too proud to go after it. Having been a dog-owner myself, I've seen that several times. So, also, with this woman. Having great faith, she knows a good thing when she sees it and is not too proud to go after it. Knowing what true faith does, Jesus instantly recognized it in her. It wasn't hidden but clearly revealed in what she said. Oh, how our Lord loves to see even the tiniest expression of genuine faith like this, and, oh, how He loves to reward it!

The time of testing now being over - and her faith having been demonstrated to be the real thing, more precious than gold, and not some worldly alloy full of unbelief and pride - Jesus said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And so it was done to her as she desired, and we know that because her severely demon-possessed daughter was healed, we're told, from that very hour!

Let me hasten to point out, believer, that faith doesn't always get everything it wants even though it prays for it fervently and persistently. The Lord Jesus might well have given this woman a very different answer to her prayer, not releasing the daughter of her demons, but giving the mother something else instead - something still good, yes, but altogether different from what she asked. But let's not think, if we don't get

precisely what we ask, and when we ask it, that the Lord doesn't hear and answer prayer. Let's not think that He doesn't reward true faith as it cries out to Him for help, because He always, always does. Whoever puts his trust in the Lord will not be disappointed!

The Lord may give us what we ask, or He may not, but remember His promise - this is what He who is faithful will do - Ps. 145:18, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth." And again, Ps. 84:11, "No good thing (it has to be a good thing) will He withhold from those who walk uprightly."

Congregation, having examined this passage in Matt. 15, let's look now at some of the practical instruction that we might draw out of it, especially as it relates to our coming next Sunday morning to the Lord's Table. Here are four points I want you to weigh carefully in your mind:

1st, What cause we have to rejoice, what cause we have to praise and thank the Lord, that we who are dogs by nature are privileged to be, by the grace of adoption, God's children and heirs, that we are invited to sit not under, but at, His Table! Have you ever pondered that, believer? Does it gladden your soul and fill your heart with gratitude to meditate on it now? If you haven't thought about it before, think about it today.

Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, beloved, that we (no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God) should be received by God with such favour, that we should be called "children of God"! Let that ring in your ear, seep down into the inner recesses of your spirit, and stir your heart with abounding joy!

2nd, True faith at times will be tested and tried, sometimes even by fire, that it may be found to praise and honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, in spite of the heavy testing and the burning flames of its refining fire, it's the nature of true faith to be humble, to desire Christ above everything else, and to say with Job, "Yes, even though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him!"

Can you, like this woman of Canaan, bear anything, whether it be the frowning providence of the Lord or His sorest chastisement, only that you be not excluded from His mercy and grace, that you receive even the smallest portion - the dog's crumb, if you like - of His favour and blessing? As we come next week to the Lord's Table, let's do so humbly, let's do so hating our sin and despising the shame that it brings, that we might love Christ instead, that we might long to serve Him, to be like Him at last, and to be with Him forever!

3rd, In the Lord's Supper we take the tiniest piece of bread, a mere crumb, and the smallest sip of wine, so that by faith our souls may feed on Christ. Better, however, these meagre morsels which signify and seal to us the Lord's blessing than all the sumptuous feasting of the wicked without His blessing. But let's remember, too, that,

as small as these portions of bread and wine may be, they speak of better things than we could ever ask or even imagine - they speak of a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, of feasting at the banqueting house in the kingdom of God, where His banner over us is love, where in His presence there is fulness of joy and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The bread doesn't signify only bread, in other words, but the body of Christ which was offered up for us. Similarly, the wine doesn't signify only wine, but is a picture of the shed blood of Christ - if we take it by faith in Christ and in remembrance of Him - it seals to us all the unsearchable riches of Christ, all the vast benefits of His covenant of grace. Jesus said to the Canaanite, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." Congregation, may this celebration of the holy Supper help every believer to anticipate and eagerly await the great Judgment at the end of the world when the Lord will say to His own, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter now the joy of your Lord!"

That's not what He will say to everybody, is it? To all the unregenerate, careless and unconverted, He will say, "I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness!" He who created heaven has also created hell. Make sure you know today, my friend, where you are going (to which of these two places you are headed) when you leave this world for the next! The Lord's Supper can bring great assurance, great peace and joy, to all who have a saving interest in Christ; but it holds out no such comfort to the wicked and unbelieving, to all who continue their earthly pilgrimage dead in sin!

4th, Are there any professing members among us this morning who feel too unworthy to come to the Table? That's good, because in and of yourself it's true. You are unworthy, and so am I. Oh, but Christ is worthy; the whole basis of our coming to the Table of the Lord next week is His shed blood and righteousness. That's the thing, you see. It's not about what we have done, but what He has done. It's about what He has achieved for us when we couldn't do anything for ourselves. So, come, believer. Don't linger or hold back.

Are there any professing members who feel too weak to partake of the elements, the bread and the wine? Again, that's good. It's only when we see how weak we really are in ourselves, it's only when we see how inclined to sin we are and prone to wander, that we can be strong in the Lord. What do the Scriptures tell us? They tell us that His strength is made perfect in our weakness. If we were strong already we would never have to eat anything; it's because we are weak physically that we need to feed our bodies, and, in the same way, it's because we are weak spiritually that we need to feed our souls.

Come, believer, come to the Table which has been prepared for you! Don't turn away because of your own unworthiness. Don't turn away because of your own weakness. Don't turn away because of any fallacious arguments of the evil one, who will do and

say whatever he can to persuade you that the bread and wine are not for you. What's more, he will stop at nothing. The point is, beloved, these elements are for you. Don't turn away from this means of grace, because it's in coming to the Table, it's in exercising faith in Christ as we partake of the elements, that our souls feed on Christ and the benefits of the sacrament are received. Amen.

Preparatory sermon preached 18 June, 2017 by Rev. Tom Aicken