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Sermon Summary # 20

The Faith of a “Dog” Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28

“Jesus had a way of exasperating people. . . . It only takes a glance through one of the Gospels. Before you know it, you find yourself *squirming*” (Joni Eareckson Tada, *Glorious Intruder* 124).

If you think Joni’s being a little hard on Jesus, or if you are afraid to agree with her because you think it will make God mad, then either you aren’t being honest or you didn’t pay any attention as we read Matthew 15:21-28.

Every time I read this story I can’t help but squirm. It makes me really uncomfortable. I feel sorry for the poor lady. After all, her child (“*little* daughter”; Mk. 7:25) is seriously demonized and sick. Why would our Lord talk to her this way? It strikes me as profoundly rude and cruel and insensitive. Are you squirming yet?

It is a tragic situation, one that ought to arouse compassion and sympathy in even the hardest of hearts. Is there anything more emotionally painful than the anguish of a mother for her tormented child? And yet on a first reading it seems as if Jesus falls well short of that kind of love and kindness we’ve come to expect of him. His first reaction is to **ignore** her presence altogether. Then, when he does speak, he **denies** her request. If that weren’t enough, he then goes on to **insult** her, calling her a “dog”! *What in the world is going on here?*

First, there is great significance in noting **where** this encounter took place: “the district of Tyre and Sidon” (v. 21). Both cities were in **Gentile territory** (in what is now southern Lebanon). Why was Jesus there? See Mark 7:24 . . .

Second, more important still is that this helps identify who this woman was who approached him. Mark says she was “**a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth**” (7:26). Matthew adds that she was a “**Canaanite woman**” (15:22). **PT: she is a descendant of Israel’s ancient and most hated and bitter enemies: the Canaanites.** Any expectation that Jesus might pay her the slightest attention is virtually shattered from the beginning.

Without question, the most important and intriguing statement in this story is found in **v. 28**. Speaking to the woman, Jesus declares – “**Great is your faith!**” (cf. Mt. 8:10). Why is her faith “great”? And how can ours be? What is it about this woman that leads to such faith? Five things.

First, a person with great faith is keenly aware that the only thing of which he/she is deserving is death. This woman comes to Jesus with no demands, only a heartfelt plea for **mercy** (v. 22). She says nothing of “rights” or “privileges” or “authority” or “expectations” or of what she thinks she is “owed”. She makes no claims. She utters no complaints. She nowhere suggests that she and her daughter deserve better than they’ve received. There is **no sense of entitlement** on her part. In asking for “mercy” she makes it clear that she knows the only thing God “owes” her is judgment. If she is to receive anything good, if her daughter is to be delivered and healed, it will only be because God in Jesus has chosen to have “mercy” on her. See Luke 18:9-14 . . .

Second, what makes a faith “great” is the “greatness” of its object. This woman’s faith was great because it was fixed and riveted on Jesus! Although a Gentile, she reverently calls him “Lord, Son of David”!

This woman was probably raised among a people and in a culture that worshipped idols. Perhaps the most prominent among these people was the fertility goddess called *Astarte* (or *Ashtoreth*). This deity has been the focus of Canaanite worship for centuries. Archaeologists have uncovered figurines of Astarte: exaggerated body parts; worship festivals devoted to her that always involved sexual orgies. It is entirely possible, and tragically ironic, that it was *this woman’s earlier worship of Astarte or that of her family before her that accounts for why her little girl is demonized!* See 1 Cor. 10:19-20 Imagine her bowing down in front of a lifeless stone figurine of Astarte . . .
See Psalm 115:3-8; Isa. 46:5-7.

Third, a person of “great” faith is *oblivious to public opinion*, caring only for the approval of God (v. 23).

Fourth, “great” faith is **doggedly persistent!** According to v. 23 she “was crying.” A better rendering of this verb would be, she “*kept on* crying”; she repeatedly cried out. This wasn’t a one-time request.

Her persistence is especially seen in the way she responded to how Jesus responded to her. Talk about overcoming obstacles!!! Jesus initially **ignored** her presence, then **rejected** her request, and then **insulted** her to her face. **Yet she persisted. She persevered.**

(1) He initially **ignores** her presence (v. 23a).

Why did Jesus respond to her initially with silence? There is a sense in which he is playing “hard to get”. *He deliberately ignores her in order to test her faith . . . to stretch her . . . to draw out from her heart what he knows is present.* Cf. Abraham and Sarah (Rom. 4:20).

(2) When Jesus finally does respond, he **rejects** her request (v. 24). “Ma’am, you need to understand something. I’m the **Jewish** Messiah. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. I’m here to answer their prayer requests. It’s their children I heal and deliver.” **See Mt. 10:5-6 . . .** Yet, whatever temporary restrictions he placed on his ministry and that of his disciples, he is gradually dropping hints that he has come to create a trans-national, racially and ethnically diverse spiritual body.

(3) But Jesus isn’t through with her yet. After initially ignoring her and then rejecting her request, he appears to **insult** her (vv. 25-27). He calls the poor woman a “**dog**”! It was common practice for Jews to refer to **Gentiles as “dogs”!** In v. 26 he’s saying: “It isn’t right for me to take what God intends for his children, the Israelites, and give it to the Gentiles, the dogs. Healing and blessing and salvation are for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

As you try to process this, remember that one of the liabilities of the written word is that a person’s tone of voice and facial expressions cannot be recorded. A wink, a pause, a tiny smile around the edges of one’s mouth can say much about what is intended by the words. This statement of Jesus, if uttered with a frown and a critical, judgmental tone would mean one thing. But if spoken with an understanding twinkle in his eye and a soft tone would take the sting out of the word he uses.

Fifth, a person of great faith is **painfully humble**, never taking offense at the truth about himself/herself.

Note how she **doesn’t** respond: “Well, I never! In all my days! If that’s the kind of God you are I’ll just go back where I came from and turn my attention to my idols again. At least they don’t insult me when I ask them for help!”

She was undaunted, undeterred, and in an incredible flash of insight picks up on what Jesus is saying. She quickly turns what most would interpret as a word of reproach into a reason for optimism and hope. She says: “Am I being compared to a dog? O.K. That’s fine, because **even the dogs** at least get to eat the crumbs that fall from the children’s table! Even dogs have their day! If all I get from you, Lord, is leftovers, mere crumbs, that is enough! Crumbs from your table will surely be sufficient to heal my daughter.”

She **doesn’t argue** with Jesus. She **doesn’t challenge his description** of her. She **doesn’t call Jesus a “dog” in return!** She **doesn’t insist that her needs make her an exception** to the rule, or that she has a right to what the people of Israel receive. She **doesn’t accuse Jesus of being unjust or unfair.**

There’s no self-righteousness in her, no false pride, just simple, and yet “great” faith that Jesus can and will provide her with everything she and her little girl need.

Conclusion:

What is the state of your “faith” today? Hesitant? Doubtful? Weak? Tired? Fearful? It was obviously our Lord’s intention and aim to respond to this woman the way he did not to make her feel badly or to put her in her place or to rebuke her for her insolence. His purpose was to draw out from her heart the deep confidence she obviously had in the power of God.