

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 20, 2023

Great Faith

Matthew 15:21-28

The story is told about a journalist who gets assigned to the company's Jerusalem bureau, and lives in an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. Every day, when she looks out, she sees an old Jewish man praying vigorously. So one day she goes down, introduces herself to him, and asks, "You come every day to the wall. How long have you done that, and what are you praying for?"

The old man replies, "I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning I pray for world peace and then for the brotherhood of man. I go home, have a cup of tea, and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth."

The journalist is amazed and asks, "How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?" And the old man, looking at her sadly, answers, "Like I'm talking to a wall."¹

I'm wondering if the woman in today's text from Matthew is feeling the same way. Her daughter is tormented by a demon. She suffers terribly. What parent wouldn't do whatever you can do, and go to whatever lengths you have to go, to find some help, hope, and healing for your child. And what better place could she have come than to the feet of Jesus, the Messiah, the one sent from God to save his people and redeem the world. And yet, in this case, the Savior is silent. Crying out to him is like talking to a wall. According to Matthew, when the woman pleads for help, "Jesus did not answer a word."

Maybe it's because he and this woman come from different people groups, different cultures, different ancestry. Jesus is Jewish and she's a Gentile. And not just any Gentile. She's a descendant of the ancient Canaanites, the bitter enemies of Israel. They were especially remembered for often having led God's people into idolatry and unholy living. So from a Jewish standpoint, this woman is an outsider. She's the other.

But remember that in this case, Jesus is in her territory. In response to opposition from some of the religious leaders, Jesus withdraws to the region of Tyre and Sidon, which means that he's in a non-Jewish area. In this scene, he's actually the outsider. Yet this Gentile woman certainly doesn't treat him like one. Somehow she has already gotten word about who Jesus is and what he can do. When he enters the region, she immediately recognizes him and greets him. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 22). This woman knows that Jesus has authority to sit on the throne of David and to wield power over evil, including demons and disease. This is the language of faith and worship. It reflects her positive response to Jesus' identity and mission.

Yet Jesus ignores her. What's worse, his disciples are unsympathetic to her and her daughter's suffering. Frankly, they're tired of her cries for help, so they ask Jesus to send her away. Just get rid of her. That way at least she'll stop bothering them. On the one hand, Jesus refuses to dismiss her. But on the other hand, he doesn't really try to engage

with her. In fact, he tries to keep his distance by telling her that his priority is “the lost sheep of Israel” (v. 24). He’s focused on preaching and practicing the kingdom of God among God’s own people. That gives him more than enough to do. If he expands his outreach to non-Jews, he’ll just overextend his ministry and maybe weaken the whole redemption project.

But that’s exactly the reason this woman has come to him and his disciples in the first place, pleading for help. Granted, God’s work of salvation begins with a focus on Israel, but aims to include others beyond the Jews. That was God’s promise from the beginning. Unless God has reneged on his word, that plan is still in place. So this woman isn’t about to go anywhere. She drops to her knees and repeats her petition, “Lord, help me!”

Still, Jesus tries to hold his ground. He restates his mission priority to the house of Israel. He even takes matters further and compares this woman to dogs who long to be fed from the table. But the woman isn’t about to take no for an answer. She counters Jesus’ comparison. “True, Lord. But even the dogs get the scraps that fall from their master’s table.” This woman knows how to think on her feet. I can just imagine Jesus’ disciples, standing there, slack-jawed in amazement. “What did she just say to him?”

One person tells about a friend in South Dakota named Diane who once posted on Facebook: “Had a nice surprise last night. At about 10:30 p.m. the phone rang. It was Governor Mike Rounds checking in with us to see how the road repair was going.” There had been a lot of flooding in the area where Diane lives, and the roads were a mess. And yes, the governor had actually called her to see how she felt about the repair progress.

When the friend contacted Diane, Diane said it wasn’t the first time a governor had called her. A few years earlier, a previous governor had called about some FEMA money for the area. Diane acknowledged that when the governor called she was in the middle of a hair perm, but couldn’t very well tell the governor to hold while she rinsed her hair. She added: “That frizzy hair haunted me for weeks.”

Thinking this all sounded pretty incredible, the friend asked Diane if she was in county government, which she wasn’t. But Diane did have this to say: “I have found that shaking the tree from the top gets the fastest results. When there is a problem, I usually become the ‘squeaky wheel,’ and I think they just want to get me off their case!”

Though the disciples want to get the Canaanite woman off their case, and Jesus himself is clearly reluctant to fulfill her request, she clearly knows how to persist in “shaking the tree from the top.” There’s no one higher to whom she can go. The Messiah has authority to get things done. The sovereignty to set things right. The power to save. As one commentator has put it, “Enough power for the house of Israel and more than enough left over for her.”²

So far in this story, this woman has gotten the silent treatment, a low ranking in the mission priorities, and been likened to a household pet. Whatever we make of Jesus and his disciples’ attitude and actions, there can be no questions about this woman’s determination to get deliverance for her daughter from the one whose whole mission is about breaking boundaries and entering new territory. Notice that throughout the story, the woman addresses Jesus as “Lord,” even as she struggles with his reluctance to help. She never doubts that she has come to the right place, and the right person, who alone can do what needs to be done. She’s simply holding the Lord to his promises and calling upon him to be true to his character.

Underneath her persistence and tenacity is a solid confidence in God's desire and power to save. She trusts that the Lord doesn't lack the resources to make her daughter whole. According to one preacher, it's as if she's saying, "We don't have to have the original fish and loaves, but even the crumbs have had your hand on them. So any way you bless me, Lord, it will be all right. I don't care about being first. All I want is your hand upon me."³ That's when Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted" (v. 28).

Great faith. Not great in the sense that you can take this woman's faith and quantify it, maybe weigh it on a scale, or measure it with some other type of instrument, and see that she has more of it than lots of other people. Rather, great in the sense that she believes in the wideness of God's mercy. She trusts that God's grace is expansive enough to include her and her daughter. She has confidence that God's heart for the lost embraces all, not only those who are part of his people Israel.

A man named Fred Penny tells of learning a lesson on prayer from childhood school trips. He says:

I grew up in Newfoundland, Canada. In 1972, our seventh grade French class decided to take a special weekend trip to the French Islands just off our southern coast. The entire weekend was going to cost each student \$50—a large sum of money, I thought. I really wanted to experience a French culture, and I thought it would do wonders for my grasp of the French language. But I assumed my parents couldn't afford it, so rather than put my parents in the awkward position of saying no, I decided not to ask.

Imagine my surprise a couple of years later when my sister arrived home from school and announced that her class was taking a 14-day Mediterranean cruise. This trip was not going to cost \$50, but \$1,000. Then she blurted out, "Mom, can I go?" What audacity!

Much to my surprise, my mom and dad declared, "Well, we don't quite know where we'll find the money, but we will find it. Of course you can go on the Mediterranean cruise!"

Reflecting on that experience, Penny says: "Do I sometimes fail to ask God for what is on my heart? Do I think his resources are scarce? Does my failure to ask indicate that my faith is small or that I assume God is unwilling to give what is good?"⁴

The woman who cries out to Jesus and his disciples has great faith. That doesn't mean she believes she can ask for just anything and everything that she wants. It means that she believes God's love and goodness aren't scarce, but abundant, and that God's promise of boundary-breaking deliverance is available to her in Christ. Put simply, this woman's faith is great because she knows God's mercy isn't small.

Author Philip Yancey writes, "I dare not meekly accept the state of the world, with all its injustices and unfairness. I must call God to account for God's own promises, God's own character.... I used to worry about my deficiency of faith. My attitude is changing, though, as I begin to understand faith as a form of *engagement* with God."⁵ Great faith. Faith like the woman who pleads with Jesus. Faith that's persistent and tenacious. Faith that shows a willingness and determination to engage with God, to struggle with God. Faith that worships the Lord, and worships him well enough and deeply enough to claim and cling to his promises.

¹ "Wailing Wall." Religious Joke of the Day. Beliefnet.com (April 25, 2003).

² Carla Works, Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28. Working Preacher. August 17, 2014. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-20/commentary-on-matthew-1510-20-21-28-5> (August 16, 2023).

³ Robert Smith, Jr., "Praying Through God's Silence." Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2006/february/prayingthroughgodssilence.html> (August 16, 2023).

⁴ "Child's School Trips Provide a Lesson on Prayer." Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/september/3092611.html> (August 17, 2023).

⁵ Philip Yancey, "Grappling with God." Christianity Today. October 20, 2006. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/october/grappling-god-philip-yancey.html> (August 17, 2023).