

A Hard Saying 3-20-05

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV)

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 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." ²³ 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." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." ²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. ²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

We have come to that turning point in Jesus' ministry when He leaves the crowds behind. He will now take His disciples into a region He had previously told them not to go. (Matthew 10:5-6) When He sent them out by twos, He told them not to go to the Samaritans or the Gentiles, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But remember, early in Jesus' ministry He witnessed to the woman at the well in Samaria. Why is He now moving into Gentile territory? ²¹ *Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.* Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities that never were a part of Israel. What has caused this change in direction?

I think we can see the answer in John 6:26. *Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.* (NIV) The turning point was when the people sought Jesus for food and physical healing rather than the salvation of their souls. Even in this Gospel of Matthew, we see a hint of this coming a few chapters earlier. Jesus said, ²¹ *"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.* Matthew 11:21-22 (NIV) Now we find Jesus in this very city that He said would be more receptive. He told the people of Northern Galilee that these Gentiles would hear and be converted. Because Jesus had rejected the traditions that the Jews held equally sacred as the Law of God, He knew His life was in danger. Yet, the time had not yet come for Him to lay down His life. That would come at the Passover. (Matthew 26:18)

In a parallel account of this story in the Gospel of Mark, we find that Jesus meant for His presence there to be a secret. (Mark 7:24) I suspect He was preparing His disciples for what was to come while He bided His time in Gentile regions. The Gospel was going to go to the Gentiles, but the Jews had to finalize their rejection of Jesus as Messiah first. The covenant of God with Abraham had to be kept, but in the keeping of it, God would open up salvation through faith in the Messiah to the whole world. (Romans 15:8) Our story today is in the one year that balanced between these two very different and yet similar workings of God. No longer would God be using the Jews as a witness to the world of a relationship with God, instead, He

Commented [notes1]: ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. Matthew 10:5-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: ¹⁸ And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples. Matt 26:18 (KJV)

Commented [notes3]: ²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. Mark 7:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ⁸ 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 Romans 15:8 (NIV)

would pour out His Spirit on all who would receive Him as Lord and they would be His witnesses. (Acts 1:8)

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."

This Canaanite woman, a Gentile, surprises us with an expression that few Jews had the faith to use. "Son of David" is a term for the Messiah. When Jesus asked the Pharisees whose son the Messiah would be, they knew the correct answer was, "the Son of David". (Matthew 22:42) There are only a few times in the Gospels when people applied this term to Jesus. One of these times we have already studied in Matthew 12. Upon healing a man who was deaf and could not speak, the crowd wondered aloud if Jesus was the Son of David, in other words, the long awaited Messiah. (Matthew 12:23) But here we have a Gentile woman in this Phoenician city calling on Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews. This is not an uninformed woman just crying out for help. She did her homework. She used this phrase knowing that it declared her faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Perhaps she had heard the stories from people passing through, or maybe some of the Jews that did business in that city had stories of family members who were delivered, and she learned from them.

When she found out that this Jewish Savior was in town, she went to plead with Him for her daughter's healing. Her understanding was that an evil spirit had possessed her daughter. It does not seem that Jesus performed an exorcism, but He healed her. The mother may have misdiagnosed the problem. Many things were attributed to demons in that day because they did not understand the physical source of the problem. I am not saying there were not demonic possessions. There are some clear cases of that such as the man we refer to as Legion, who, by the way, was also a Gentile. (Mark 5:8-9)

The woman asked for mercy. Remember that mercy is getting the opposite of what you deserve. To request mercy is to recognize that you should not get what you are asking. If someone is in debt, they may ask their creditor for mercy. They do not deserve an extension, but are asking for something more generous than what they have agreed to or deserve. That also tells us that this woman was open to the work of God's Spirit. We often hear complaint instead of faith. "What did I do to deserve this?" As fallen people, we do not realize that anything short of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, is less than God deserves. The fact that He does not deal with me for my ingratitude is mercy. It is only the repentant soul that realizes we are in need of the mercy of God every day. This woman humbled herself and realized her spiritual condition. She not only saw that Jesus was the Savior, but that she was a sinner. That gives me hope for much of the world that has not heard the Gospel. This is the whole prerequisite for salvation, knowing you are a sinner and that God has provided mercy in His Son, Christ Jesus. It almost seems that she had a better understanding of what was happening than the disciples did.

²³ 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."

Jesus' silence seemed to reinforce their idea that He was not concerned about the Gentiles. However, He was drawing her closer, not driving her away. They had misinterpreted Jesus'

Commented [notes5]: ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
Acts 1:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ⁴² "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied.
Matthew 22:42 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ²³ All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"
Matthew 12:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: ⁸ For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!" ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many."
Mark 5:8-9 (NIV)

instruction to not go to the Gentiles to mean that the Gentiles were not worthy. No one is worthy, especially the Jews who had God's word and refused to live by it. If Jesus' silence confirmed their feelings, His answer would confuse them even more.

²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

Wait a minute. What about the prophecy that Jesus was to be a light to the Gentiles? (Luke 2:32) What about His former work with the Samaritans? (John 4:39-42) What about His speech in the synagogue of Nazareth about God sending prophets to receptive Gentiles, (Luke 4:24-28) or the passage in a preceding chapter about Tyre and Sidon being more receptive than Jewish towns? What was Jesus saying? Yes, His main mission was, at that time, to the sheep of Israel that had been led astray by their shepherds. (Jeremiah 23:2) However, He knew that God so loved the world, not just the Jew, and this would be His ultimate mission.

Like many of us, the Gentile woman had a great burden in the suffering of her daughter. We would rather suffer ourselves than to see our children suffer. She was a woman with a mother's heart. She was doing what the Psalmist wrote. "From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (Psalm 61:2).

This makes Jesus' response even more difficult to understand. It was true that up to that point Jesus' primary mission was to the Jews. He had come as their Messiah king. They would ultimately reject and crucify Him at the coming Passover and then the Gospel would go into all the world. So, in one sense, at that particular moment, what Jesus was saying was just a statement of fact. Perhaps, at the leading of the Spirit, Jesus was eliciting the response of faith that was to come from this woman. (Deuteronomy 8:2) She had to come to the same place that the Samaritan woman eventually came, to recognize that salvation is of the Jews. (John 4:22) She recognized Him as the Jewish Messiah, but did she worship Him as her own Lord?

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

She had gone way beyond what a woman of her culture would do because of her desperation to see her daughter healed. The posture of kneeling (literally to prostrate oneself) was one of worship in that culture. But Jesus was about to take her one-step deeper by uttering one of the hardest phrases in the New Testament.

²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." The Jews referred to the Gentiles as dogs. They believed that they were the Children of God and all other nations were unclean. You might think Jesus' response was what you would expect from an arrogant Jew. It was what the disciples expected, in spite of the many lessons Jesus gave them to the contrary, like the healing of the Centurion's servant. (See Matthew 8:5-13) The word Jesus used for dogs was not the usual word used for a Gentile, it was that used for a pet.

The response from the woman was one of the most humble expressions ever uttered. I think Jesus knew by the Spirit that she had it in her, and that the Spirit was bringing her to a place of complete surrender and acceptance of Jesus as her own Lord, not just the Jewish Lord. (Jeremiah 29:13-14a)

Commented [notes9]: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Luke 2:32 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: ³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers. ⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." John 4:39-42 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: ²⁴ "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown." ²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. Luke 4:24-28 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: ² Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD. Jeremiah 23:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ² Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. Deuteronomy 8:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. John 4:22 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD Jeremiah 29:13-14a (NIV)

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Have you ever heard anyone express such humility? Most people would say, "Fine, you snob. Some compassionate person you are!" In fact, many of us may recall an expression from our own lips in a similar situation, "God don't You care? I thought You were compassionate and gracious, so then why is my loved one suffering. Why am I suffering like this? If You are so good, where is Your goodness now?" That is the voice of pain. That is the voice of a wounded spirit. God understands. But how much better to respond like this woman, or like Job when he said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." Job 13:15a How much better the words of Mary when told she would unjustly endure the scandal of an unmarried pregnancy, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be as you have said." (Luke 1:38)

This Gentile woman, whose name we do not know, uttered one of the most humble expressions ever to be voiced. It was full of faith, and full of humility. It came from a heart so desperate that she refused to be offended, and it reaped the answer she so urgently sought.

²⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Jesus declared this woman had great faith, like He declared the Roman Centurion had great faith. (Matthew 8:10) We can see in this that faith does not necessarily come from the right upbringing, or being in worship services, or in the right group, or even knowing and understanding Scripture. It comes from receiving what we do hear. When we hear the testimony of Jesus and believe He is the Son of God, when we believe He can do the impossible, that is when we voice faith like this. Then, believing, we persevere, knowing He alone can help.

Just like the healing of the Centurion's servant, this woman's daughter received a long distance healing. Mark tells us that when the woman got home, she found the daughter lying in bed. (Mark 7:30) Whatever her problem was, she must not have been able to rest in bed. Now the mother found her daughter resting and well. What a relief! What a reward of her humility and faith. She did receive mercy, both for her daughter and for her soul.

What can we learn from this story with the difficult saying? This Gentile woman gave us a demonstration of how to respond when God tests you. Life is guaranteed to be full of difficult sayings. We need to know the best way to respond, not just so that we can have our way, but also so that we can do what is right. Job responded properly, but He still lost his children. Jesus always said what was right, but He still went to the cross. So keep in mind, the right response is not a tool to have your way. It is just the right thing to do. Then, whether your prayer is answered or God has another plan, He will see you through the situation.

This woman first recognized that Jesus was Salvation. She saw that He was the answer to her need, the One who could heal. Many of us look to man and man's knowledge, and God may use man as His instrument, but never forget that it is God who alone can meet our need. In that sense, we have a similar message to the Palm Sunday message. Jesus presented Himself to the people of Jerusalem on the day they

Commented [notes16]: ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. Luke 1:38 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: ¹⁰ When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. Matthew 8:10 (KJV)

Commented [notes18]: ³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Mark 7:30 (NIV)

were to select their sacrificial lambs. It appeared that they were glad to receive Him, but they were really trying to use Him as a solution to Roman domination and taxation. They were not receiving Him as their sacrificial lamb, but as a general. Moreover, when He did not perform according to their expectations, the shouts changed from "Hosanna" to "Crucify Him!" This Gentile woman and the people of Jerusalem both had a choice to make. Just as Jesus predicted, the Gentile made the right choice; the Jews initially made the wrong choice. Perhaps she came with the same heart as the Jews, wanting to use Jesus to obtain what she desired. But it was Jesus' harsh expression that pushed her a step further to surrendering to Him as Lord.

We can see that she recognized her place. God is God and I am not. I am a rebellious creature in need of more mercy than I can comprehend. That puts us in a humble place that is the only appropriate place when we come before God. We have no right to demand anything from our Creator. His gracious love provides a way that we can make any request. (Daniel 9:18) When we realize that, we ask in all humility, knowing that we do not deserve to ask. We can only come boldly to His throne because we are in Christ Jesus. (Hebrews 4:16) If He refers to me as a dog, I just say, "Yes, Lord, but You are a God who is merciful. Be merciful to this dog." (Job 42:5-6)

There is one more thing we can learn from this humble Gentile woman. She persevered until she got her answer. No matter what she heard, she pressed on and finally came to worship Jesus as her Lord. It reminds us of Jacob wrestling with God. "I will not let go until You bless me." (Genesis 32:26) Sometimes we have to show how serious we are. It is not that we wear God down, but that we prove to ourselves how much we desire the answer. We find we are all the more grateful when it comes. Jesus taught a parable about persevering in prayer. He taught that we should pray and not give up. (Luke 18:1) Sometimes we just need to persevere, even when we get some hard answers. (Lamentations 3:32)

That is great faith according to Jesus. Great faith receives an answer from God. It is faith that recognizes Jesus is the answer to our need. It is faith that worships Him as Lord of our life. It is faith that surrenders self in all humility. It is faith that knows that God is unlimited in ability and power. It is faith that perseveres until the answer comes.

Do you have great faith this morning? Do you come to Jesus for what He can do for you, or because He is worthy of your humble surrender? Do you want Him to deliver you from this thing or that, but really want to remain being your own master? Or have you come to the wonderful place where, on your knees before Him, you confess you are just a little dog that would be more than satisfied with the crumbs that fall from His table? In the storms of your life, will Jesus say to you, "You of little faith" as He did to His disciples, (Matthew 8:26) or "great is your faith" as he did to this woman and the Centurion? It depends on humility, expectancy, and perseverance. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." 1 Peter 5:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: ¹⁸ Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.
Daniel 9:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
Hebrews 4:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: ⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. ⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."
Job 42:5-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."
Genesis 32:26 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: ⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.
Luke 18:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: ³² Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.
Lamentations 3:32 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: ²⁶ He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.
Matthew 8:26 (NIV)