

“PET DOGS AND TABLE CRUMBS”
MATTHEW 15:21-28

I want to begin by sharing with you my greatest nightmare, which, I'm pretty sure, is every parent's or grandparent's greatest nightmare. The circumstance that would be most troublesome and most unbearable is if one of my children or grandchildren were being abused by someone or something and I could not do one thing to help them. Instead, I was forced to stand by and simply watch them suffer.

Some of you have had to live that nightmare because of some disease or medical condition from which your child has suffered. Some of you have lived that nightmare after learning that your child was abused or bullied. Some of you have had to bury your children or grandchildren after a long, painful illness.

If that is true you will have no problem identifying with the main character in the story we are looking at today. She is a mother living a parent's worst nightmare. Not surprisingly, when she discovers that Jesus is nearby, she stops at nothing to ensure that her suffering child benefits from His power to heal.

Look at Matthew 15, **verse 21**. ²¹ *And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*

As you know by now, wherever Jesus went in Galilee He was followed by massive crowds who brought their sick and disabled loved ones to Him so that He could heal them. And Jesus granted their desires because He had compassion on them. So, He spent long day after long day expending His energy and strength on behalf of desperate people. Sometimes He was so busy He went without food. Sometimes He went without sleep.

This was exhausting. And because Jesus had a body just like ours with vulnerabilities and limitations, He *had* to look for opportunities to get away from people in order to be refreshed and replenished. That was almost impossible to do in Galilee because the crowds would somehow find out where He was or where He was going. So, *“he went away from there [with His disciples] and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.”*

Tyre and Sidon were port cities on the Mediterranean coast north of Galilee in a region called Phoenicia. Both cities were centuries-old international trading centers that figured prominently in the distribution of the world's goods and resources. The *district* of Tyre and Sidon included a number of smaller towns and cities in an area that covered several hundred square miles of what is now known as Syria and Lebanon. Where precisely Jesus went in this region is not known, but we do know that the roundtrip journey by foot would have taken several weeks if not months. This trip was, in a sense, an extended leave of absence from His ministry—a hiatus if you will.

The motive for this hiatus is hinted at in Mark's gospel, for He tells us that, after arriving, Jesus went into a house and did not want anyone to know where He was. In other words, He wanted and needed privacy, presumably so He could rest. But Mark also tells us that He could not be hidden. Obviously, word about Him and what He had been doing in Galilee had preceded Him, and it was not long before the Phoenicians discovered that He was in their midst.

We are introduced to one of those people in **verse 22**. ²² *And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”*

This woman's racial profile was typical of this Gentile region. Mark identifies her as a Syrophenician woman while Matthew uses the more antiquated term, Canaanite. The Canaanites were an ancient civilization that can be traced as far back as 3,000 B.C. Compared to many of the surrounding civilizations, they were known to be an advanced culture. The world's first-known alphabet, discovered in the mines of the Sinai Peninsula, is Canaanite.

Most of us are aware of the long history of enmity between the Jews and the Canaanites, beginning in the time of Abraham, escalating during the time of Joshua and Judges, and continuing even until today. 90% of the DNA of modern-day Lebanese can be traced to the Canaanites. Perhaps even more noteworthy, 50% of the DNA of modern-day Jews can also be traced to the Canaanites.

Yet despite the longstanding enmity, this woman refers to Jesus, a Jew, as both Lord and Son of David. In calling Him Lord it is almost certain that she was thinking of His divinity. Given her daughter's condition, she would have heard about His authority over evil spirits and His ability to expel them from afflicted human beings. It would be natural for one to deduce that such a person came from God, or perhaps even was God.

Furthermore, Son of David is a distinctively Jewish designation that refers to a descendant of the great king, David. But it came to be used of the anticipated Messiah, viewing Him as a great warrior like David and one who would establish a mighty kingdom (Morris PNTC). By addressing Jesus as "Son of David" it seems likely that this woman had some knowledge of the Scriptures, including those prophetic passages about Messiah, and that she had connected the dots between those ancient prophecies and this contemporary figure named Jesus.

But the most striking feature about this woman was her desperation brought about by the miserable condition of her little daughter. The text says that she came to Jesus crying, which is an understatement, for the word that is used describes a loud, shrill sound. So, "crying" might better be translated "screaming" or "wailing", which implies that she was *frantic*. And the reason she was frantic is that her daughter was "*severely oppressed by a demon*." I believe my version (ESV) also understates this condition. The word implies a state of being that is extremely dangerous and harmful. One version translates it, "my daughter is *cruelly tormented by a demon*" (HCSB)

In other words, this demon was abusing this girl, and causing her to be violent—to harm herself and perhaps others. This is not uncommon in demon possession. Demons are malevolent spirits that try to inflict as much damage upon their host as possible, and they frequently attack those who try to help the host.

Now, put yourself in the place of this mother. You see a powerful, destructive spirit that hijacks her body and then compels her to cut herself or pull out her hair or convulse violently on the floor. And you are watching this but not able to do anything about it. You cannot protect your child, you cannot make the demon go away, and you cannot even go near her when she is having these episodes. What would you do? (We know of many instances in Africa where the parents of a demonized child chain him/her to a tree in the yard, and then throw food to him/her but not go near for fear they will be attacked.)

I'm trying to help you understand the desperation of this woman. Overwhelmed with sadness, worry, and fear, but most of all overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. So, when she heard that the One who had been exorcising demons in Galilee was nearby, she

made haste and when she got near to Him began screaming, “Lord have mercy on me!” Had I been her I would have done the same thing.

Prior to this, in Matthew’s Gospel, whenever someone came to Jesus and asked for help, He responded immediately and affirmatively. However, look at **verse 23a**. ²³ *But [Jesus] did not answer her a word.*

Jesus’ silence could easily be interpreted as a lack of interest, a lack of compassion, or an unwillingness to help. But before we jump to any conclusions, I want to remind you that every response Jesus had and every word He said was intentional. I assure you, there is a purpose for His silence at this point in the encounter.

Do you remember when Jesus heard that His friend Lazarus was sick to the point of death? John tells us that He stayed where He was for four more days before He travelled the few days’ journey to Bethany where Lazarus lived. But by that time, He had already died. And He was criticized, even by Lazarus’ sisters, for not coming sooner. They said, “If you would have been here Lazarus would not have died.”

But John tells us early on in the story that Jesus knew what He was going to do (John 11:4). He knew that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead in order to glorify Himself. And I would suggest to you that when this troubled woman came to Jesus, even though He responded with apparent indifference, He knew what He was going to do. He was testing her, and He was testing the disciples. Look at **verse 23b**. *And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.”*

Apparently, this woman’s perpetual shouting was getting on their nerves, and they may have interpreted Jesus’ silence to mean that she was getting on His nerves, too. So, they begged Jesus to make her go away. By the way, their plea did not necessarily mean they did not want Jesus to grant her request. The disciples had never seen Jesus refuse to help anyone who came to Him for help, so it is likely they expected Him to do so for her. They just wanted Him to do it quickly, so she would calm down and they could have some peace and quiet.

But Jesus responded to their request by saying to them, **verse 24**, ²⁴ *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*

Several times in His Gospel, John records some statements Jesus made about His ministry activity. He said, “I say only what my Father tells me to say and I do only what my Father tells me to do” (12:49). In other words, He did not do or say anything of His own accord; He came to do and say what His Father told Him to do and say in order that the Father’s purposes might be accomplished.

The disciples knew this was a *Canaanite* woman, a Gentile, an outsider, someone who was not entitled to covenant blessings. They also believed, at the time, that only Jews would be part of the kingdom that Jesus was establishing. So, His statement that He had come only for the lost sheep of Israel would have resonated with their theology. “Oh yeah. We get it. She’s an outsider so you don’t have to do anything for her. You don’t even need to have compassion on her. You can dismiss her without a twinge of guilt simply because she’s not part of the chosen race.

But again, I want to remind you that Jesus already knew what He was going to do, and His statement to His disciples was intended to prepare them to begin thinking outside their theological box—a box in which covenant blessings were given exclusively to the Jewish race.

However, no sooner had Jesus said these words to them than the woman, **verse 25**, *“...came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”*

I suspect she heard what He said to the disciples. I also suspect she was so desperate and so determined that she broke through whatever door or gate or barrier so she could get right next to Jesus. She threw herself at His feet and pled with Him to help her.

Verse 26. *²⁶ And [Jesus] answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”* Ouch! This *sounds* like an insult, doesn’t it? This *sounds* like a racial slur, which, if true, would call into question Jesus’ sinlessness, because it is a sin to insult someone and it is a sin to be racist.

By the way, Jews in the day frequently insulted Gentiles by calling them “dogs” (κυν), referring to the wild, snarly scavengers that roamed freely in Palestine. But the diminutive form here (κυνάριον) suggests a more affectionate term for domestic pets. But even so, Jesus’ remarks still strike the modern reader as derogatory.

Mark seems to soften Jesus’ statement a bit where he records Him as saying, ⁽²⁹⁾ *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”* (Mark 7:27). Furthermore, there is evidence that Jesus’ statement was a common proverb in the day, and that no one would have interpreted it as a racial slur or an insult.

Nothing about the woman’s response in verse 27 suggests that she interpreted it as an insult. For her response, which turns out to be the climax of the conversation, is the lesson that, I believe, Jesus was trying to coax out of her, not only for her sake, but for the disciples’ sake. **Verse 27,** *²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”*

This comeback to the Lord Jesus is what we call a *homerun*. In fact, we might say that Jesus, in His statement, lobbed her a *softball*, and she hit it out of the park. Or to use a volleyball metaphor, Jesus set her, and she spiked it. Notice, she begins by affirming the truth of this proverb. When feeding a household there are, indeed, priorities, and children, naturally, get first dibs. As endearing as pets might be, no one (at least in Jesus’ day) would have argued that pets take precedence over children. But that doesn’t mean that pets don’t get anything. They may not have first dibs, but they do have their place in a household. And at mealtime, that place is underneath the table where they can eat the scraps that fall to the floor.

And, perhaps by implication, this woman was asserting that pet dogs belong to the master, too, and while not as important as children, it is still the master’s responsibility to feed them. If He does not feed them, He can be sure that those pets will remind Him, through their incessant whining, that they’re hungry. And if He is annoyed by that unpleasant noise, He can easily remedy the situation by giving them a morsel or throwing them a bone.

Her response was brilliant. But don’t take my word for it. Look at **verse 28.** *²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.*

Incidentally, only this woman and another Gentile, the centurion at Capernaum (8:10), are publicly commended for their faith. And of this woman Jesus says, “Great is your faith!” In the structure of this Greek sentence “great” is positioned so that it is emphatic—“O how great is your faith!”

Her faith impressed Jesus!

It is notable that Jesus does not commend this woman for her persistence, or her

courage, or her motherly love, all of which are commendable. He praises her for her faith. She *believed* in Jesus. She believed He was the Lord God, that He was the Son of David (Messiah), and as such not only could He exorcise the demon from her tormented daughter, but He *would* do it. And that tenacious faith was rewarded.

Jesus says that it will be “*as you desire*” or “*as you wish.*” And Matthew tells us that the girl was healed immediately. He didn’t have to go *to* where the girl was and confront the demon in a face to face. As was the case with the centurion whose slave was sick, there is healing at the request of someone other than the sufferer, and the healing comes at a distance. Which demonstrates the extent of both Jesus’ sovereignty and His power.

Jesus can command demons to do His bidding from a distance. Whether they can hear His voice from afar, or whether He simply controls them through the power of His mind, I don’t know. But the fact is, *they* know. And whenever and however He commands them, they must comply immediately.

So, what are some implications and applications of this story for you and me? Let me give you a couple:

First, formerly non-Jewish outsiders are now insiders. This woman was, in a sense, a pioneer for all of us who are non-Jewish. In a sense, she is our matriarch. Her statement, “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table,*” ought to compel non-Jews to say, “Hallelujah!!!” For by giving her His attention and acting on behalf of her daughter, *Jesus was cracking open the door of salvation to the Gentiles.*

It’s true, while He was on this earth Jesus’ ministry was to the lost sheep of Israel, because they have first dibs with kingdom access and kingdom blessings. But in this story Jesus cracked the door open for Gentiles, knowing full well that the door would be flung wide open just a few years later, when He gave Peter a vision at Simon the Tanner’s house in Joppa, and then directed Him to go to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius in Caesarea. Acts 10 records the events when Gentiles became insiders of God’s covenant blessings. From that moment on Gentiles no longer had to settle for table crumbs, but actually got a seat at the table.

And that is a blessing we must never take for granted. God didn’t have to do that; He wasn’t obliged to do that. But He so loved the world—the world comprised of Jews *and* Gentiles—that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Second, Jesus still has absolute authority and power over demonic forces. When He speaks, they still have to listen and obey. When He simply wills them to do something, they must obey.

I was preaching in the shade of a large baobab tree in southern Sudan on a hot, dusty Sunday afternoon. About a hundred and fifty people (mostly pastors) had assembled and were sitting and listening attentively in their black suits and ties in the hundred-degree heat. In the middle of my sermon I noticed an agitated elderly woman who was pacing back and forth behind the crowd. I turned to my interpreter and said, “Who is that woman?”

He told me that she was the mother of the wife of a pastor who lived nearby, that she was demon-possessed, but that there had been many attempts to exorcise the demon with no success. So, she would often come to meetings in her agitated state and be a distraction.

I felt prompted to stop preaching and walk back to where the woman was pacing. As I did, I was followed by a dozen pastors. I said to them, “Let’s pray for this woman’s

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deliverance, but let's pray calmly. God does not need us to shout" (I had been in many African prayers meetings that turned into shouting matches). As we prayed, in Jesus' name, she was quickly and dramatically delivered, and then she calmly went and sat down by her daughter, with whom she had not had contact for years.

Jesus has all authority and all power. He is sovereign over Satan and his demons and can stop them from tormenting and oppressing people whenever He chooses. And ever since He ascended into heaven where He sits on the throne, He chooses to deliver demonically oppressed or possessed people through his servants who are willing to confront those demons. So, when we encounter a person who is cruelly tormented by a demon, it is appropriate that we help that person. Because we know the Healer. We know the One who can rescue him/her. And He is able.

Pet Dogs and Table Crumbs **Matthew 15:21-28**

Main Idea: *A rebuffed outsider is rewarded for her tenacious faith*

A desperate woman comes to Jesus (21-22)

Her racial profile (21-22a)

Her understanding of Jesus (22b)

Her daughter's demonized condition (22c)

The woman is rebuffed by Jesus and His disciples (23-28)

Jesus ignores her (23a)

The disciples discuss her with Jesus (23b-24)

They beg Jesus to send her away

Jesus declares that she is an outsider

The woman demonstrates a tenacious faith (25-28)

She kneels and begs (25)

She is compared to a pet dog (26)

She asserts the right of pets to eat table scraps (27)

She is rewarded for her tenacious faith (28)

Application

Non-Jewish outsiders **can** obtain God's blessings

Jesus is not the least bit put off by our *unbecoming* faith