

WHAT DOES GREAT FAITH LOOK LIKE?

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The First Lesson: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 133-134

The Second Lesson: Romans 11:13-15, 28-32

Sermon Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen

God's Word for our consideration today is our Gospel Lesson from Matthew, chapter fifteen, verses twenty-one through twenty-eight. These are the words of our Savior.

Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!" But He did not answer her a word.

His disciples came and pleaded, "Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt in front of Him, saying, "Lord, help me."

He answered her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and

throw it to the dogs.”

“Yes, Lord,” she said, “yet the dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire.” And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

These are your words, Heavenly Father. Sanctify us by your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, dear fellow redeemed,

When a compliment is rare, that makes it just all that more special, doesn't it? Especially when it comes from somebody who usually doesn't say anything. Or, when that compliment is something you don't hear every day. You think about the last time somebody said to you, “*Boy, I am glad to hear your voice.*” Or, you think about the last time somebody said something like this, “*I truly admire your gifts and talents.*” Or, when somebody told you, “*You know, your being here brings great joy to my day.*”

When a compliment is rare, and when you don't hear those things all of the time, and then you hear them, it really makes it that much more special, doesn't it? That is all the more true with the compliments Jesus bestowed. In our Gospel reading here, Jesus paid this woman a rare compliment, when He says to her,

“Woman, your faith is great!”

It is especially a rare compliment, because Jesus only says something like this two times, in His entire earthly ministry. One time, here to this woman, this Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, whose daughter was demon possessed. And, the other to another Gentile, a Roman Centurion, whose servant was ill, and was dying. Jesus was on His way to heal that servant, and the

servant sent messengers to Jesus saying, *“Don't bother coming. Just give the word, and I know my servant will be healed.”* It is in both of these cases where Jesus says to the person involved, “You have great faith.”

We hear that rare compliment, and we understand this is something special Jesus is talking about here. It causes us, as hearers of Jesus' Word, to kind of sit up, and take notice. It causes us to wonder, *“Well, why does Jesus say these things about this particular person? Why does Jesus say about this woman, **“Woman, your faith is great!”**? Why does Jesus pay her this compliment?”* It makes us wonder, *“What is it that makes faith great, in the first place? What does great faith even look like?”*

From our lesson today we get a couple different answers to that question. The first one is pretty obvious.

-Great faith perseveres in seeking Jesus' help and blessings.

Like I said, that is the obvious thing we see in our reading, right? In times of desperation, faith seeks the Lord's help. We see that in the case of this woman. Matthew tells us Jesus and the disciples had withdrawn from Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are two cities that were originally part of Israel's inheritance, when they took the land, back in the days of Joshua. But, these two cities were never controlled by the Israelites. They left them to the Canaanites. So, these were two Gentile cities in the northwestern part of Palestine, along the coast. This was a place where Jesus and His disciples could go, and not be noticed. And yet, they go up there, and Matthew says suddenly this woman appears. In the Greek he actually uses the word, “behold”, like it was a surprise. This woman appears from that region, and she is calling out after Jesus. She is crying out after Jesus, not just one time, not just twice, but again, and again, and **again** she is crying out to Jesus saying,

**“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.
A demon is severely tormenting my daughter.”**

Think about how terrifying her situation was, how desperate she must have been, this woman, this mother. We can't imagine what she was going through to be watching as her daughter was being tormented, and to be possessed by a demon. If you were in that situation, how desperate would you be, to try to find help. So, this woman is desperately seeking Jesus, desperately seeking His help, calling out, crying out, again and again.

Only, what happened?

“But He did not answer her a word.”

This woman's prayers are met with a wall of silence.

When you think about that, it seems harsh on Jesus' part, doesn't it? And yet, in your own life, haven't you noticed those times when you pray, when you are desperately seeking God's help, and there seems to be no answer? We have often felt that same way at times. We pray for the same thing again, and again, and **again**.

During the fourth century, there was a Christian leader in the church by the name of Augustine, Augustine of Hippo. He was the bishop of the city of Hippo. He was somebody who was a faithful Christian, later in his life. But who, for a large part of his young adulthood, had strayed, who had lived a very sinful life. He had moved in with a woman who was not his wife, and lived with her for many years. He even had a child with her, out of wedlock. He even joined a cult. Later on in his life, Augustine would talk about his mother, Monica, and how his mother prayed for him. She prayed the Lord would bring him to repentance, prayed the Lord would bring him to Christ. She prayed for seventeen years for that to happen. You look back on it, and you see, *“Oh yeah, the Lord finally answered my prayers.”* But, in the midst of those seventeen years, how do you think Augustine's mother, Monica, felt, as her prayers seemed to be answered by nothing but silence?

And yet, what does great faith look like? Our temptation in those moments, when our prayers don't seem to be answered, our

temptation is to wonder, “*Well, am I praying hard enough?*” “*Am I believing hard enough?*” “*Maybe God just is not listening to me.*” “*Maybe God does not want to help me.*” “*Maybe God has no answers for me.*”

We start to doubt. We start to lose our faith.

And so, what does great faith look like?

Jesus is not answering this woman. The disciples are starting to get a little bit uncomfortable, and maybe even annoyed by what is going on, because this woman is violating all sorts of societal norms in order to come, and talk to Jesus. First of all, Jews and Gentiles did not associate with each other. Second of all, women did not approach men in public. And yet, here is the Gentile, Canaanite woman following Jesus around, crying out after Him,

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!”

The disciples say to Jesus, “**Send her away...**” “*Get rid of her. She is making a scene. She keeps crying out after you.*”

And yet, she comes, and kneels in front of Jesus. She falls down on her hands and knees. She says,

“Lord, help me.”

She did not give up. She kept pursuing Jesus' help and blessings, even when it seemed like His help and blessings were not going to come.

And that really is what faith does. Faith perseveres with faith in Jesus' help and blessing even when it seems like that help and blessing is not going to come.

-Faith continues to trust in Jesus.

When you think about that woman, and the faith she had, and you start to think to yourself, “*You know, I sure wish I had a faith like that*”. A lot of times, when we hear about people like this woman, the message we get is, “*You just have to believe harder. You just have to trust more in Jesus.*” And yet, that is not really the message Jesus is trying to send by the way He deals with this woman whose

daughter is suffering from demon possession.

When we think about great faith, what is it that makes faith great?

What does great faith look like? It is not just the fact that there is perseverance in times of trouble, and faith continues to trust, but it is understanding why. Why does faith persevere in the midst of trials? Why does faith continue to trust and continue to seek Jesus' help and blessing? The reason is because,

-great faith ultimately trusts in, and relies on Jesus, as Lord and Savior.

You know, we live in a day and age where people talk a lot about having faith, whether it is an entertainer, or athletes, or politicians. They all talk about, "*It is important to have faith*", but faith in what? Some kind of generic faith in a generic god that will generically work everything out the way it is supposed to?

You know, this woman's faith was anything but generic, when you think about how amazing it is that this woman came to have faith in Jesus. She was from the region of Tyre and Sidon, these two Gentile cities, these two places where people had no idea who Jesus was.

And on top of that, they were places where there was plenty of idolatry going on. There were plenty of Canaanite worship practices were going on. Plus, all of the Greek gods and goddesses that had been imported into that place. In that region of the world there is a famous temple in a cave to the god Pan. You can still go and see it today, if you travel in that part of the world.

This is a place where nobody knew who Jesus was, and yet this woman comes to Jesus, and she cries out after Him. She says some very specific things, doesn't she? She says,

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!”

Her faith is anything but generic. The language she uses there is Old Testament Messianic language. That is language that shows this woman did not just believe Jesus was strong enough to help her, or that He was mighty enough to help her, that He was some great

prophet, or anything like that. She was showing, by the language she used, that she understood Jesus was the promised Messiah, that Jesus was the One who was to come, the promised Seed of Abraham through whom all the nations on earth would be blessed. She was showing she believed in Jesus, first and foremost as her Savior, and Lord, and that Jesus was God. She trusted in the promises of Jesus' grace and mercy, fully knowing she was not worthy of any of it. There is that moment when she falls before Jesus, on her hands and knees and says,

“Lord, help me.”

How does Jesus answer her? He said,

**“It is not good to take the children's bread
and throw it to the dogs.”**

We still think it is derogatory to call a woman a dog, in our day, and age. But, it was really derogatory, back in Jesus' day, to call anybody a dog.

You know, in our day, and age we think of dogs as pets, right? You think of Paris Hilton who goes, and gets her little chihuahua, puts the chihuahua in her purse, and carries the little dog around. Oh, it looks oh so cute. Right? The little dogs are cute, and do all kinds of funny things.

But, when you think about what a dog does. Dogs are dirty and messy. In the book of Proverbs it says that a fool will turn to his folly, as a dog returns to its vomit. Dogs do all kinds of disgusting things. They eat all kinds of things they should not, and then they go, and drink out of the toilet.

So, Jesus is saying to this woman, *“You are a dog.”* And, the thing is, if you were a Jew, looking at those people who were up in Tyre and Sidon, those Gentiles up there, you saw them as 'dirty dogs' who did all kinds of disgusting things in the name of their religion, who committed all kinds of terrible atrocities in the name of worshiping their false gods. And, you thought of them as 'dogs'. When this

woman appears before Jesus, and fell before Jesus, that was how His disciples looked at her.

And yet, you listen to the response that this woman gives to Jesus, when He basically says she is 'a dog'. She understood exactly what Jesus was talking about. She said,

**“Yes, Lord,
yet the dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from
their masters' table.”**

She is basically saying, *“Yes, Lord, I understand. I am a 'dirty dog'. But, I know you don't just love the children, but you also love the 'dogs'. And, the 'dogs' also are recipients of your grace, and receive gifts of your grace and mercy.”*

Her faith was not misplaced, was it? Her trust that Jesus would help her, even though she was totally unworthy of it, her faith was not misplaced.

Jesus said,

**“Woman, your faith is great!
It will be done for you,
just as you desire.”**

That very hour Matthew says her daughter was healed. Jesus gave the word, and that demon was gone.

When you think about how wonderful it is that Jesus does this for that woman, not because she persevered, not because she persistently kept crying out after Him, but Jesus was going to do this the entire time. It was because of His grace, because of His love. You know, when you go back to what Jesus says,

“It will be done for you, just as you desire” (*just as you wish, you could even say*).

When I was in high school, and we went on choir tour, they made us watch a movie, again, and again, and **again**, called *The Princess Bride*. I don't know if any of you have seen it, or not, but if you are below a certain age, you have probably seen it before. In the

introduction of the movie, the first five minutes of the movie, they are introducing the two main characters, the two protagonists, the farm boy, and the young woman who eventually would be the princess. She is bossing him around, and telling him to do all these kinds of things. Every command she gives him, he answers her by saying, "As you wish." What she came to learn, the narrator says, (who is Peter Falk from *Columbo*) the narrator says what she came to learn was that every time he said, "As you wish," he was really saying, "I love you".

So, as you think about why Jesus gives this woman her wish, it is because of His love for her, because of His love for all sinners. This was a gift of His grace, just as it is a gift of His grace anytime Jesus answers our prayers. That is who our Lord and Savior is. You think about the fact you and I are just like this woman. We don't deserve anything good from our Lord, at all. We deserve to be condemned for all eternity. We deserve to be treated worse than dogs. And yet, our Lord Jesus loves us so much that He, Himself, was willing to be treated worse than a dog, in our place. We deserve to have all of our prayers answered in silence. And yet, the Lord Jesus endured the silence of His Heavenly Father on the cross in order to pay for all of our sins.

When you think about the great love Jesus has for you and for me, and the great miracle of it all, how can somebody like this woman believe in that? Again, that faith is also a miracle of God's grace, the gift of God's grace. Her faith in Jesus, (just like all faith in Jesus), is a gift. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, that brings us to faith in Jesus, strengthens our faith in Jesus, and gives us faith to cling to Him, and lean on Him in every circumstance. Remember that. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we get it in our heads, "*If I have a strong faith, then I must have worked hard at that*". We tell ourselves, "*My faith is weak, so I have to work harder*".

But remember that basic Bible passage you learned a long time ago,

from Ephesians, chapter two, verses eight and nine.

**“For it is by grace, through faith
and this not of yourselves (*by this He means faith*),
it is the gift of God,
not by works, that no one can boast.”**

God is the source of our faith. When we think about what great faith looks like, ultimately it looks like a gift.

So then, why does Jesus make this point, saying to this woman,

“Woman, your faith is great!”?

Well, for two reasons.

-Number one, so that we understand God's grace is meant for all people, and faith can come to all people, through the Gospel. There were people who brought this message of God's grace to this woman. She heard it, and God, by His grace, caused the Holy Spirit to create faith in her. And so, we understand, too, when it comes to God's Kingdom of Grace, as we look at all of the people in the world, wherever they are from, whatever country they are from, whatever gender they are, there are two groups of people. There are those who are baptized into Christ, and there are those the Lord wants to be baptized.

-Number two, if someone like this woman, this Gentile, Canaanite woman, if somebody like this can have great faith, well then, 'dirty dogs' like you and like me can have great faith, too.

Amen.

Now, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds, through Christ Jesus.

Amen.