

February 17, 2021 | Standalone Teaching

Matthew 15:21-28 | Mercy for Dogs

One of my favorite sayings is, “Better half a loaf than none at all.” It puts forth an optimism about life I so often lack. But embedded in that saying isn’t just a lesson about being positive; it’s also a message about faith. You see, we often fail in our walk with Jesus because we feel as if our faith is not sufficient for the task in front of us. We know we have *some* faith, but we pessimistically believe it isn’t enough. However, we fail to realize that having even a little bit of faith is more than enough to face even the biggest of problems (cf. Lu. 17:6). You see, we stumble in our walk not because we lack faith but because we are far too easily discouraged from trying at all.

Today we’ll be given a great example of an individual who is not so easily discouraged. She will be ignored. She will be refused. She will even be called a dog. But nothing will deter her. This mother’s last hope is Jesus, and even though she knows she has no right to ask for help, she asks anyway. Her eternal optimism, combined with her quick wit, will even extend Jesus’ own teaching to include herself. She doesn’t want much. She doesn’t ask for a seat at the table. All she wants are the scraps, the leftovers, the crumbs. If she could get that, it’ll be enough.

READ: Matthew 15:21-28 (ESV)

²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.” ²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 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.

By Matthew 15, Jesus’s persona and popularity have grown to such a height that wherever he went, a crowd would usually follow. In fact, one chapter before this one relays the account of Jesus feeding thousands with nothing more than a boy’s lunch. But with this notoriety also came a fair bit of conflict. The religious leaders of the day are not in favor of this carpenter from Galilee and his disciples because Jesus would regularly call them out for their hypocrisy. As such, the Pharisees and Sadducees—who were usually at each other’s throats—banded

together to combat their common enemy. They would regularly plot to capture Jesus, but each one would fail. They would fail for several reasons, but prime amongst them was because Jesus's time was yet to come. So he would, very literally, remove himself from harm's way.

This is how we get to this meeting with this unnamed mother. Jesus is giving himself distance from Israel and moves to a Gentile region. One would think, as I'm sure the disciples thought, there would be little work to be done as this area had little to no Jewish influence or importance. Jesus himself had said that he and his disciple had come only for Israel's lost sheep and to avoid the Gentiles altogether (cf. Matt. 10:5-6). But like the meeting with the Samaritan woman, Jesus had reason to go to Tyre and Sidon. He had an appointment with a Gentile mother whose child was being tormented by a demon. As we saw, Jesus went away from Israel not only to meet this woman's genuine and pressing need but to teach his disciples a lesson about the global mission of the Kingdom and then ultimately about faith in general.

Now, we could talk about how this scene, like so many others, shows that while Christ first came for the Jew, the Gentile was always a part of his plan. As far back as Abraham, God had intended to graft in Jew and Gentile alike into his family (cf. Gen. 22:18; Rom. 11:17-18). But considering we're amid a mission emphasis this month, that point will be covered extensively on Sunday morning.

Instead, I want to focus on what this woman can teach us about faith. In fact, there are ***three*** things about this woman that illustrate how we should be utilizing our own faith.

i. Her Unreserved Petition (vs. 21-23)

We're told the woman follows them and pleads with Jesus, "Have **mercy** on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." To which, Jesus gets nothing from Jesus. We're even told the disciples pleaded with Jesus, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us."

Interestingly, the woman petitions Jesus three times in the short passage. However, given the disciple's response initially, we can assume it was more than just three. It seems she had been following them for some time, all the while making her request.

The point is that this mother was unreserved. And for a good reason, as she wasn't asking for herself but on behalf of her daughter. She was a mother who would be so bold that she would risk annoying the one she was asking until she got an answer.

READ: Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Boldness in our petitions is indicative of a great faith. Are the prayers big enough? Do they reflect confidence in a big God? Or are they small? Are they easily solved through human agency and means?

ii. Her Unashamed Prostration (vs. 24-25)

Interestingly, Jesus never answers the disciples' request to send this woman away. Almost as if prompted by their callousness, Jesus finally turns and says to the woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." As we talked about before, Jesus' earthly mission at this time was exclusive to Israel. Only when a Gentile exhibited extraordinary faith did Jesus ever deviate from his focus on the Jews (cf. Matt. 8:5-13). But she pressed on anyway. In fact, she came and knelt before Jesus and said, "Lord, help me." Like a salesman who's finally gotten his foot in the door, this woman takes Jesus' response as an invitation rather than a rejection and pleads for the third time.

What's more, in this short exchange, this woman has now referred to Jesus as not only 'Lord' but 'Son of David,' indicating her knowledge of him goes well beyond even the Jews, save the Disciples. But even more remarkable than her familiarity with Christ's identity is the fact that when she finally catches up to Jesus, this woman prostrates herself before him. She knows Jesus to be Lord, the Son of David, the promised Messiah, and the only reasonable response when you come into the presence of one so great is to kneel. The woman worships Jesus. Her faith led her to be unreserved in her supplication and unashamed in her adoration.

READ: Psalm 100 (ESV)

¹ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! ² Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! ³ Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! ⁵ For the Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Worship from the heart moves the body. It focuses our attention on God alone, and everything else fades away. So much so that we could be singing in a room full of people, but yet we'd only be lifting up your voices to an audience of one. Worship brings us to our knees. It brings tears to our eyes. It brings a smile to our faces. It moves our feet. Worship from the heart moves the body.

iii. Her Undaunted Persistence (vs. 26-28)

Though she would not be deterred by Jesus' initial refusal, the Messiah nevertheless doubles down on his rejection by telling this poor woman, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Now, I know many of you would like for me to whip out my Greek lexicon and tell you that though it sounded like Jesus was comparing this mother to a dog, he, in fact, meant something less offensive. But I can't do that. Jesus likened this woman to a dog. And no matter what era you live in, it has always been rude to call someone a dog.

So, the question then becomes, why did Jesus say that? That wasn't very nice. And you'd be right. But Jesus called this woman a dog to teach his disciples—and by extension, us—a lesson about persistence. Jesus knew even if he resorted to name-calling, this woman would not be swayed from her objective. Her faith was far too sturdy, and his disciple needed to learn a few things about tenacity and resolve. This is why, without skipping a beat, this mother quickly retorts, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She finds a loophole. Remarkably, she does not deny that she's the dog in this metaphor, but she does point out that even dogs are given crumbs to eat. She doesn't want a lot. She doesn't want a place at the table. She just wants help. Just once. Then, as you know, Jesus commends her faith by saying, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

READ: Luke 18:1-8 (ESV)

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man."³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man,⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" ⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says.⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?" ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

John Wesley famously said, "God's command to "pray without ceasing" is founded on the necessity we have of His grace to preserve the life of God in the soul, which can no more subsist one moment without it, than the body can without air." Prayer must be undaunted in its pursuit. It must be persistent and relentless as the flow of a mighty river.

So, what's the takeaway?

A faith that is unreserved, unashamed, and undaunted is a faith that accomplishes great things.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Standalone Teaching | Mercy for Dogs

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

One of my favorite sayings is, "Better half a loaf than none at all." It puts forth an optimism about life I so often lack. But embedded in that saying isn't just a lesson about being positive; it's also a message about faith. You see, we often fail in our walk with Jesus because we feel as if our faith is not sufficient for the task in front of us. We know we have *some* faith, but we pessimistically believe it isn't enough. However, we fail to realize that having even a little bit of faith is more than enough to face even the biggest of problems (cf. Lu. 17:6). You see, we stumble in our walk not because we lack faith but because we are far too easily discouraged from trying at all.

Today we'll be given a great example of an individual who is not so easily discouraged. She will be ignored. She will be refused. She will even be called a dog. But nothing will deter her. This mother's last hope is Jesus, and even though she knows she has no right to ask for help, she asks anyway. Her eternal optimism, combined with her quick wit, will even extend Jesus' own teaching to include herself. She doesn't want much. All she wants are the scraps, the leftovers, the crumbs. If she could get that, it'll be enough.

A faith that is unreserved, unashamed, and undaunted is a faith that accomplishes great things.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: