Saving Faith

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[0:00] Let's pray. Almighty God, we thank you that we can gather here together in your presence, around your word, and around your table.

And I pray that as we study your word, you would encourage and inspire and enable us to submit ourselves to your word, to your agenda, to your way, that our lives may be lived in harmony with you, our God and our creator.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Please be seated. Please keep your Bibles open to Matthew chapter 15, which is on page 16 in the New Testament section of your Bibles.
We have a very interesting little story here of a Gentile woman who accosts Jesus. They appear to engage in some rather witty repartee, and then in the end a healing happens.
In some of the commentaries, this woman is noted for her great wit, but I don't think this is the interpretive key to the passage. But as I start, before I start, what I want to do is put just one word before you to help us look at this passage.
[1:19] And this is the word agenda. Anyone who has ever sat in any kind of meeting will know that meetings tend to go better if you have an agenda established in advance.

An agenda helps keep everything from veering off course. Agenda, it's a program or a schedule, a purpose. Sometimes an agenda can be a negative thing.
You can have a conflicting agenda. Or someone can have an overt agenda for something. Well, in this passage, what we are brought face-to-face with is an agenda.
But it's God's agenda for Jesus. For Jesus' ministry. Jesus' mission. And we almost see a clash of agendas between what this woman wants Jesus to do and what his agenda is going to be.
We see this woman comes with requests of things she wants done. But in the end, she receives from Jesus what he's going to do.
[2:23] And along the way, we learn a very important lesson about faith. That faith submits and receives rather than demands and decides.

And the challenge that I want to lay before you this morning is this. What is your agenda with God? Are you pursuing an agenda with God? Are you clashing with God's agenda?
See, there's quite a difference between marching up to Jesus, if you like, with your agenda firmly set before you, and bowing down before Jesus in complete submission to him.
Even when he says no. Even when he says not yet. Or even when he says stop. I want you to look at your heart and your relationship with God.
Are you locked in a struggle with God? Is your agenda what you want or don't want? What you will do and won't do, competing with his gracious and loving will?
[3:33] Agendas with God can come in all sorts of different forms. It might be you want God to do something in your life, but are afraid he will say no. It might be that you want God to allow something in your life that you know to be sinful.

And you struggle. It might be that you resist submitting your life to God's will and purpose for you. It's his agenda against yours. Are you submitted, bowed down, kneeling before Jesus, your Lord, your Savior, and his agenda?
Well, let's look at this passage briefly, because there's actually a great deal going on in this short story. Let's follow with me on page 16, verse 21. The context of the chapter we've had in verses 1 to 20, Pharisees and teachers of the law, in other words, the religious and educated elite of Jesus' day, they come in opposition to Jesus.
And then in verses 15 and 16, Jesus' own disciples are unable to understand him. Come across as rather dull. And then in verses 21 to 28, our verses this morning, this Canaanite woman recognizes Jesus.

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She confesses him. Son of David, have mercy on me. So this passage takes us back into Jesus performing miraculous deeds. And in this case, he exercises a demon at a distance.
[4:59] And then going on from verse 29 and following, Jesus will go out and heal great crowds of the lame, the maimed, the blind, and the dumb. And so we have this Gentile woman approaching Jesus.

Her daughter, who is demonically possessed, remains offstage. And the focus is upon this woman and her approach to Jesus. And so right away for us, an issue rises up between the relationship between the ministry of Jesus and the Gentiles.
We're given a location, Tyre and Sidon, in verse 21. These are Gentile cities. In verse 22, the woman is identified as Canaanite. She's not Jewish.
She's not of Israel. She's pagan. Have mercy on me, O Lord, son of David, she says. But in verse 23, Jesus does not answer her. He says nothing to her.
The disciples come. They beg him to send her away. Presumably all the wailing she is doing is giving him a headache. And anyway, she is a Canaanite woman. She's not Israel. We're not here for her.
[6:05] Then we find this very strange statement of Jesus in verse 24. And this is an agenda statement for him, isn't it? And directed, I think, to the disciples, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

But the woman is not discouraged. And this seeming rejection doesn't deter her. She presses closer in, kneeling before, actually in the Greek, worshipping Jesus, saying, Lord, help me.
And then we get this extraordinary dialogue between Jesus and this woman, almost a repartee about bread and crumbs, children and dogs. And then in verse 28, Jesus praises her faith and her daughter is healed.
Now let's look at these things in due course. The first thing that is presented to us in big, bold letters is Gentile. She is a Canaanite. We are being placed in Gentile location.
Tyre and Sidon. Jesus has gone on a little rest break there. We have encountered Tyre and Sidon before in chapters 11 of Matthew's Gospel, where these Gentile cities are praised by Jesus for being more open to repentance than Galilean cities were.
[7:15] She is a Canaanite woman. She is a descendant of the ancient Canaanites, the bitter biblical enemies of Israel. They were pagans. Their idolatry often led Israel, of course, into pagan idolatry.

Yet from her lips come the clearest words of faith in Jesus. Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. What she's doing here is confessing Jesus as the Messiah in good, proper Jewish terms.
This phrase, Son of David, occurs a number of times in Matthew's Gospel, always referring to Jesus the Messiah. This is how the Gospel opens. The first sentence is, this is the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.
These are the same words as two blind men in chapter 9 that Jesus heals. They cry out to him, have mercy on us, Son of David. So these are words of salvation.
It's as if Matthew is saying to his audience, look, even her, even this Canaanite woman confesses Jesus.
[8:27] But her words do not appear to move Jesus to intervene in this case. In fact, we are told, verse 23, he says nothing. Because there is an issue here.

She is a Gentile. She is not a covenant person. She is not Israel. And in a way, her approach to Jesus is actually kind of provocative and intrudes into his ministry.
There's an agenda happening here. She wants Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, to do something for her. Now, it's not a bad agenda. She wants him to heal her daughter. But she wants Jesus, the Messiah, to intervene in her situation.
But she is a Gentile. And the issue is that the Messiah was promised to Israel. Israel is the heir of the covenant promises of God. Not her.
And so the tension in the story focuses upon, will Jesus accede to her agenda, or will she to his? And it hinges then in verse 23. Jesus did not answer her a word.
[9:33] And his disciples came and begged him, saying, Send her away. She is crying after us. And there you have, hanging in the balance, Jew and Gentile.

Mission to the Jews, faith in the Gentile. God's covenant people, pagan people. Of course, the question arises, what do you do when unclean people begin to profess faith in Jesus?

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What happens when the person who is beyond the pale confesses Jesus as Lord? So we begin to have a different understanding of what Jesus' mission is about.
It's not going to be Jew versus Gentile. It's going to be about faith in Jesus as Lord. Wherever you find that faith, in whomever you find that faith, their salvation has come.
Jesus has already made an exception in Matthew's Gospel and intervened in a Gentile situation in chapter 8. That's the healing of the Roman centurion's servant. You've got a pagan Roman soldier coming to Jesus.
[10:44] At the end of that episode, Jesus marvels at the centurion's faith in him and compares it to that of Israelites and says, Truly I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.

So the idea that we are getting here is that just being Israel, just being physically Jewish, isn't going to cut it anymore. There has to be more. There has to be faith in Jesus.
And yet, nevertheless, there is this statement in verse 24. Jesus answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
Now, he is probably, I think, speaking to his disciples here, and he is restating the agenda for his mission. Now, of course, the ultimate goal of Jesus' mission is the cross. That is where he's heading.
His purpose is to suffer and die on the cross and rise again on our behalf, providing a substitute for the sins of everyone. But in terms of the actual time he spent in his ministry, Jesus' ministry was largely confined to the lost sheep of ministry.
[11:55] There were exceptions, as we've seen in this passage, but mainly he ministered amongst Israel. For example, in Matthew 10, Jesus sends out twelve disciples on a mission and says, Go nowhere amongst the Gentiles, enter no house of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

See, there's a limitation there. We're confining this to Israel. And here in 15, verse 24, he says, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
There's the sense of Jesus being sent by God to the lost sheep of Israel. But, at the end of the gospel, after his resurrection in Matthew chapter 28, Jesus sends out the disciples and says, Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.
Now what we are meant to see in all this is that Jesus' mission to Israel is God being faithful to his covenant people.
This is God being faithful to the promises he made to his people. They are being given the privileges of God's covenant people.
[13:08] The blessing, the Messiah, comes to them first. And then the gospel goes out into the world. Paul teaches that in Romans. He says in Romans 1, I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

First for the Jew, then for the Gentile. Now why that is important, he explains in Romans chapter 15. He says this, For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised, to the Jews, to show God's truthfulness in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs.
He's referring back to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in Genesis. So Jesus comes and ministers amongst Israel to prove God's faithfulness to the covenant promises he made right back in Genesis.
And that's why Jesus makes this point and that's why it is important. Jesus is demonstrating God's faithfulness to Israel, his covenant people.
God is demonstrating his faithfulness to his word. What God said he would do in Genesis, he does in Jesus. What God promised to do in Genesis, he fulfills in Jesus.
[14:29] He is being faithful to the promises made in his word. And you see, one of the ways God proves his godness to us is by telling us in advance what he is going to do and then demonstrably doing it.

And that's what God did. In Genesis, he made promises, covenant promises. The patriarchs, that's Abraham, his son Isaac, and his son Jacob. God promised them a land and a nation and a blessing.
And this blessing would reach out and encompass all the nations of the world. You see, right there, right back in Genesis, you know, to Abraham, God was preaching the gospel to him, looking ahead to a time when his blessing would reach out to all the peoples of the world.

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Now those promises came into fruition with Jesus and they continue to be worked out today. Genesis 12, 1-3, the Lord said to Abraham, I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing to all peoples on earth. So you will be a blessing and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.
[15:48] See, there's a pattern here of what God is promising and what he promises in the Old Testament. He promises a land, he promises a nation, he promises a blessing, and then that blessing will go out and encompass all the peoples of the earth.

And that is the foundation for the ministry of Jesus. That's the agenda here. That continues to be the framework for the progress of the gospel today.
The promise is the agenda at which Jesus is the center point. He is the blessing. He is the blessing. See, Jesus is the Christ of Jewish prophecy.
Jesus is the fulfillment and culmination of the promises God made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, to Israel. So that puts Israel in a privileged place in the history of God's dealings with the human race, in the history of salvation.
They are the people from which the Messiah would come. That is the place where the blessing would appear. This might seem a bit arcane to us today, but it's actually quite important because it means that Jesus does not appear as if out of nowhere.
[17:00] Jesus is not God's latest idea. And it means that Jesus cannot be hijacked by other human agendas. The only agenda is that which is set by God's word, his promised word.

See, if God didn't fulfill his promises made in Genesis, he wouldn't be God at all. Jesus wouldn't be his Messiah. But, because Jesus is the Messiah, promised by God, fulfilling his word, that is the agenda that is set for him.
His agenda could not be determined by the people around him. Jesus' agenda could not be altered by the current need. The privileges of the kingdom were offered to God's people.
The covenant-making God was in Jesus, keeping his word with his people, and that is the point Jesus is making here. You see, this woman is going to have to do more than just verbally assent to Jesus.
She is going to need to submit to his rule. She is going to have to subordinate her agenda to his, even when it means hearing the word no.
[18:19] She is going to have to order herself in relation to Jesus' agenda and not the other way around. See, it's a faith that submits, a faith that receives what it is Jesus is offering.

That is what we all have to do, too, as a church and as individual Christians. I find that there are many, many different competing agendas or agenda, I'm not sure what the plural is, for Jesus. See, one of the things I find astounding in the Christian scene today is the multiplicity of Jesus' agendas floating all around. People want to have a social justice Jesus or an eco-warrior Jesus. We live today in a very pluralistic society, and so people want a Jesus who isn't the Savior of the world, but a Savior amongst many. I read an online sermon the other day in which the speaker spoke about Jesus as the liberator of the oppressed and marginalized people everywhere.
And he said that wherever people stand up for full inclusion and justice, Jesus is there. You see what's going on? There is a human agenda around which we are expecting Jesus to fit himself.
[19:39] We think if we just talk enough, Jesus will bend himself around us. Yet all along, there is but one agenda for the ministry of Jesus, and it is an agenda established by God, fulfilled by God, and which continues to be worked out by God today as the gospel progresses.

We try to make the gospel relevant to today, and in so doing, bend the gospel around ourselves. But what we need to do is bow ourselves down before Jesus.
We have to bow ourselves down before his agenda. And so it is that this woman receives. Looking at verse 26, And he answered her, It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. She said, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire.
And her daughter was healed instantly. I think that this is a tender moment, even a lighthearted moment, but a very important moment. She is very physically close to Jesus.
[21:01] She is bowing down before him. And at this moment in this discussion, while you do see something in this woman's quickness of wit, but you also see her submission to Jesus' agenda.

This is a moment of submission. She doesn't object to the analogy which compares her to a dog, but accepts it for what it is. She accepts the implied allusion to herself, and in that acceptance,

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reveals her faith in Jesus.
She says, Yes, Lord, what you're saying is true. It isn't right. But even the dogs get the crumbs. She doesn't stand there to argue that her claims are as good as anybody else's.
She does not discuss whether Jew is better than Gentile or Gentile is better than Jew. She does not dispute the way God works out his divine purposes. She does know that she knows she needs help.
She needs help. And she finds it in the person of the Lord, the Son of David, who stands before her. She is confident that even though she does not deserve to sit at the Messiah's table, yet even so might she be allowed to receive a crumb of the covenant mercies of God.
[22:23] Great is your faith. And you see, ultimately, saving faith is like that. For when the power of God intrudes into our lives and calls us sinful, we can resist and say, I am righteous, or we can accept and receive mercy.

When the gospel calls us out of self-absorption to place Jesus on the throne of our lives, we can bow down or we can turn away. For in the end, saving faith means confessing Jesus with your lips and bowing down before him with your life.
He does not fit himself around our lives and needs. Jesus does not make himself relevant to the moment, but calls us all to be a part of God's great unfolding agenda that is salvation.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.

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