

The Canaanite's Faith

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[0 : 00] Let me say first of all how glad we are to see our students back again for the Christmas and New Year holidays.

It's always a real joy to see them coming home and to having them with us for these few short weeks. And we pray that God will bless their time both in university or college or whatever they do, but also their time of rest.

In fact, that's what we're going to be reading about in part in the passage that we're going to look at this morning. Matthew chapter 15. I want to take up the reading at verse 21 again and to have a look for a few moments at this very strange miracle which Jesus carried out upon the daughter of the woman who came to him from Canaan.

Verse 21. And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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. 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.

[1 : 26] He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But she came and knelt before him, saying, Lord, help me. And he answered, It is not right 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. This passage raises several questions.

I guess there's nothing straightforward about a miracle wherever you find it in the Bible. In fact, a miracle by definition is not straightforward.

It's a reversal of what you would expect in nature. It's God's intrusion or his intervention into what you would expect in nature. Whether it's a blind man being given his sight again.

[2 : 35] Or whether it's a deaf person being able to hear again. Or the most spectacular miracle of all was when Jesus raised the dead.

When he put into reverse the process which was irreversible. But today, this passage throws up a lot more questions than the kind of questions we would normally ask when we're looking at a miracle.

There's the question of, for example, what was demon possession? It appeared that Jesus met with many people during his time on earth who were, in the words of the Gospels, possessed by demons.

And I don't see any reason why we should take that other than face value. Why should we interpret demon possession to mean anything else?

Any more than we interpret any other part of the Bible to mean anything else? It appears that particularly at the time when Jesus lived on earth, there were many people whose personalities, whose thoughts, whose minds had been taken over by demons.

[3 : 52] We believe in demons. The Bible speaks very clearly about them. There are millions of them. All over the world. And it seems that for, in some circumstances, we are not entirely sure how that some people who met with Jesus, or at least some of who met with Jesus, had been possessed to the point that they no longer had control over their decisions or their will or their actions or their intentions anymore.

I'm not going to go into that this morning. I'm not going to go into that this morning. Because if we did, then we would be here all morning, and I believe we would be focusing on the wrong thing.

That's all I'm going to say. There are many instances, several instances in the life of Jesus of people who were possessed by demons. Of course, the question as to how much to what extent it happens today is a question that perhaps you may want to think about at your leisure.

It's not a very pleasant thought, but the fact is that it was the devil that suggested sin in the first place to Eve, and the devil has been active ever since.

And yet, at the same time, we believe that when Jesus gave his life on the cross, that the devil was defeated. He is a defeated enemy. And our focus should not be, although we acknowledge the existence of the devil and the power of the devil and the activity of the devil, that our focus must not be dominated by the devil.

[5 : 19] Our focus must be on Jesus, and that's what it's going to be today as we look at this miracle. Of course, then the question is, is it a miracle when Jesus actually casts a demon out?

It doesn't go against the law of nature. It more shows his authority rather than his miracle working power. Again, I'm not going to go into that. We believe in this story at face value.

First question I'd like to spend a few moments on is, why was Jesus outside his own patch? I know I'm using a colloquial language here quite deliberately.

Jesus had a patch. He had a territory. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and he spent most of his time in Judea amongst his own people, and that becomes very clear in the story itself.

He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. But here, we find him outside. He's in foreign territory. He's gone abroad.

[6 : 22] Of course, he didn't have to take a boat to go abroad the way we do. He could just cross the border. But he was in a foreign country.

And the only clue we have to that is found in verse 21 in the word, withdrew. Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

And I personally believe, with many commentators, that this was a period of holiday for Jesus.

Perhaps not the kind of holiday that you and I would have, but it was a period in which there was both rest and there was a change of scenery for him.

Now, it's not hard. It's not hard for us to imagine the kind of tiredness that must have come upon Jesus. He was constantly on the go.

The Son of Man, he says, has nowhere to lay his head. Look at what is said immediately afterwards. Now, this was going on all the time.

[7 : 39] Wherever Jesus went, there was a crowd following. He was continually, tirelessly teaching them, preaching to them, announcing to them the kingdom of God, persuading them that he was Jesus, that he was the Christ by his miracles and by his authority.

And people would come to him. Sometimes people would come at nighttime or individuals like Nicodemus and the rich young ruler, some of them coming sincerely and some of them coming in sincerely trying to trap him.

He was constantly besieged by people, asking him, following him, plaguing him. That's why he came. To be with people and to teach them and to give his life eventually for them.

And being a human being capable of tiredness, as you and I were, having limitations. He needed his food. He needed his drink. He needed his rest. He needed his time off.

Same as every other human being has. And that word, withdrew, is the only clue we have as to why he was in that foreign country in the first place.

[8 : 51] We are not the first generation to have foreign trips away. Spurgeon withdrew every year. I think it was to the south of France or to Italy.

I'm not entirely, I can't remember exactly where it was. But Spurgeon, the great preacher in the 19th century, he used to, and there was no jet planes in his day. He used to get away to warmer climates so that he wouldn't be able to recognize anybody and so that nobody would recognize him.

And perhaps this is exactly the reason why Jesus, and why should we think that Jesus doesn't need rest just because he is God.

Remember that he was man as well as being God, fully man and fully God. And yet, even there, someone knew who he was.

Someone in need. I have no idea how the news got to this Canaanite woman who has no name.

But somehow or other, she discovered, she found out, someone told her, news got to her, that Jesus was in the vicinity.

[10:00] I guess the fact that more people didn't come to Jesus looking for a miracle indicates their indifference, their lack of interest. And yet, this woman couldn't afford to be indifferent.

You see, when you see your need of Jesus, you can't afford to be indifferent to him. Today, it is trendy to be indifferent to Jesus, not to have anything to do with it.

But once God shows you the real state of your heart and your real destiny in this world, then Jesus takes on a whole new meaning.

And for this woman, that's exactly what happened. Her daughter was possessed by a demon, and no doubt she had tried everything that was possible for her to rid her of this trouble.

And she couldn't. When your daughter, when your son or your daughter, you would do anything that you can to resolve the problem. And she obviously heard that Jesus had a reputation for, amongst other things, driving out demons by his own authority and by his word.

[11:13] She looked him out. She found out where he was. And she came to him with this question. Have mercy on me, O Lord, son of David. My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.

And it's at that point that the intriguing, difficult, awkward questions rise. Because it appears at face value that Jesus might have been less than reluctant to do what this woman is asking him to do. And that surprises us because it was for this very reason that Jesus came into the world to heal the sick and to carry our sorrows. And yet here is a woman.

Here is someone with a real need. And it appears that Jesus is not ready to listen to her or to do what she is asking her. And it seems to go against everything that we know about Jesus.

It's an awkward passage. It's probably not the few verses that you would ever show to someone who was interested in the Christian faith and yet who wasn't a Christian. And perhaps if you're reading the Gospels for the very first time, you've said to yourself, so far, so good.

[12:27] I can understand everything so far. Matthew 15, this is a problem. How can I explain? How can I reconcile? The Jesus who is so ready to listen and so ready to help and so ready to give himself to every other person.

And yet here is this woman and it appears that he's less than willing, perhaps even reluctant, to answer her cry.

What are we to make of this? Let's just go through it very carefully and see if our suspicions are real or not.

Because very often it's when you go through a passage like this carefully, then you discover there's more to it than perhaps at first meets the eye.

First of all, she said, Lord, son of David, my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.

Response, verse 23, He did not answer her a word.

[13:33] The disciples come in at that point, as they quite often did, whenever they thought somebody was pestering Jesus, like the little children who came to him on one occasion and they tried to drive them away. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, Send her away, for she is crying out after us.

She was a pest as far as they were concerned. And then he says the first words. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

That's the first thing he says in response to this woman's coming to him. She came again. She kept on coming. She came and knelt before him.

This time she was kneeling before him with all the desperation that she could muster, saying, Lord, help me. She was reduced to three words.

Lord, help me. And then he answered again. With what appears to be that lack of readiness.

[14:37] It is not right 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.

To which he replied, Woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly.

The surprise today is not the end of the story that the daughter was healed instantly. Because that's what happens in every other occasion when Jesus is asked to do something and to heal someone.

The surprise is the process by which it happened. Let's look at it then very carefully. First of all, he said nothing.

When his disciples came to him and said, Send her away, he said, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then she came again and she said, Help me. Then he said, It is not right to

take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

[15 : 45] So first of all, there's silence. And then there's a statement that appears to be said to his disciples, but actually could have been said to himself. What does the silence indicate?

The silence indicate that something is going on here. And I believe, and I can only express to you what I take the passage to be myself. There are several different views.

I believe that there is something going on within the heart and in the mind of Jesus. There are several things going on. And in the words that he spoke, we get to find out what these were.

This was troubling him for one thing. And I remember talking to a person once who actually believed that Jesus' reluctance was due to him being stressed.

That he was genuinely humanly stressed with all the work that he had been doing in Judea. And that he simply couldn't face. Now, there's something within me that just doesn't quite go along with that.

[16 : 49] That's going too far. But there was something in this that troubled the Lord. And remember, there were many things that troubled the Lord during his life.

And what troubled him, first of all, was what he said here. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Now, of course, you know who he meant by that.

The Jew. The Jewish people. The people amongst whom he was born. Jesus himself was a Jew. You must never forget the Jewishness of Jesus. And if you really want to understand the Gospels, you have to understand the Jewishness of Jesus.

I'm not saying you can't be a Christian without understanding it. But if you really want to grow in your knowledge of the kind of things that Jesus said and the things that were going on around Jesus, you have to understand the Jewishness.

Because it was to them that he had come. And yet, having come to his own people, we read that his own people received him not.

[17 : 58] Jesus, as well as being constantly surrounded by a crowd of people who were wanting to see signs and miracles and they wanted to hear something from him, he was also constantly surrounded by hatred from his own people.

From early on in his ministry, he couldn't walk the streets without seeing the glances of the scribes and the Pharisees, the hypocrites, the people who hated Jesus and they couldn't stand the sight of him and they couldn't wait until they plotted his downfall.

See, when we talk about the hostility that there was to Jesus, we don't often think of outright hatred from day one. It's hard to live with that kind of hatred.

It was difficult for Jesus continually to go outside knowing that there were people in the street, many of them, the very people who should have received him and who should have recognized him and they wanted rid of him.

His own received him not. And you know what? As time went on, despite the apparent interest there was in him, with all the crowds bringing their sick to have him healing them, their hearts were largely far away from him.

[19 : 18] These were the very people that stood in front of Pilate and said, crucify him, crucify him. When he was arrested, everyone left him.

They scattered to the four winds. And so, his own people were his enemies.

And it's hard to live with your enemies. And here is this woman. She doesn't hate him. She would do anything for him.

She's coming to him for the first time, not knowing anything about him. She's got no prejudice. And could it be at that point that Jesus was tempted just to escape his own people?

That's what I believe. And if you think that that is suspicious, there were other times when Jesus was tempted in exactly the same direction, like when he was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days.

[20 : 36] Jesus continuously had to face the tempting thought to avoid the cross and the conflict of his own people. And this was Jesus as much reminding himself, of course, he didn't need reminded, but he tells us what was going on in his own heart.

I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. In other words, I've got to go back. I cannot be tempted to stay here.

Even although these people will honor me, they will revere me, they will love me, I've got to go back to my own people. because it is amongst my own people that I will die for the sins of my people.

I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Whatever he said was not going to be enough to send this woman away because this woman knew that Jesus could heal her daughter.

This was her last chance and she was so consumed with her own sense of need and with her own love for her daughter that she wasn't going to let him away that easily. She came again and she said, Lord, help me.

[21 : 57] That is what faith is. In this woman, you see a picture of true, genuine faith, not because it is strong faith, but because it rests in the right person.

people talk today about faith. You hear it all the time. It rolls off people's tongues. As long as you have faith, then that's what counts. It doesn't matter. As long as you are sincere in what you believe, then it doesn't matter what you believe.

How many times do we hear that? That's the kind of world we live in when they talk about faith, just as if it's like a commodity. But the Bible reminds us of what true faith is.

If you today want to know what true faith, the first thing you've got to discover is who that faith must rest in. And there is only one person. If you have real faith today, the question is, who does your faith, it's not whether you have a faith for a long time or whether you have strong faith or tempted faith or weak faith or defective faith.

Every one of us, we have defective faith. The question is this, who does my faith rest in? And here's a woman and her faith is more and more and more focused and the more she, the more she appears to be pushed away and that's the appearance of it, the more she is determined to come to the Lord.

[23 : 21] I wonder sometimes you read this story and you think, why was this woman so determined and what was it about Jesus that produced this response in the woman that you would expect that she would go away in sadness and in disappointment and in depression and yet she didn't.

She kept coming time and time and nothing, it appeared that nothing was going to put her off coming to Jesus. And I believe that the key is this, because he spoke to her, because she could hear him speaking about her and as long as he was speaking about her, as long as she was the subject of the conversation, it didn't matter to her what was being said but that Jesus was considering her.

She was listening to his word and as long as the word was there, then there was hope for her and for her daughter. Now here we come to the central, the central statement of Jesus.

He said this, it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. What did this mean? Was this, did this mean that somehow or other Jesus was elevating the position of the Jews above the Gentiles?

Well, perhaps we'll put it another way. It is right to suggest that Jesus was reminding the woman of the separation that there was between the Jews and the Gentiles.

[24 : 56] This woman wasn't a Jew. She was a Gentile. She was a Canaanite and there was always for centuries a separation between the two in that the Jews were the covenant people of God and they worshipped the living and the true God.

And so Jesus was actually right. this woman worshipped the wrong gods, false gods, idols, Canaanite gods.

I'm not entirely sure who they were at that particular time but they weren't the living and the true God. But in the absence of these other gods being able to do anything for her, she was now crossing the border and she was now coming to a God that was strange to her.

A God she had never worshipped before. And perhaps if she, as she came at first it may even have been just out of convenience.

I'll try it anyway. But as she came again and again Jesus forced her to work out her request by the proper kind of logic that there should be in every one of us.

[26 : 12] And I believe that when Jesus said it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs, he is reminding the woman that you've spent your whole life worshipping other gods.

What gives you the right to now at this moment in time ask me for help? When you know all the time that the God who I am is not your God.

You have never worshipped me. You have never worshipped my father in heaven. You worship your own false gods. Why now at this moment in time? What gives you the right and what gives you the reason to think that you can come to him?

He's not your God. You have your gods and you'll probably go back to your gods after you think I'm going to help you. And so he put it like this it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

Now stop for a moment. When he says dogs here he's not talking about the wild savage dogs that there were roaming about the streets of cities and towns at that time. There were these kind of dogs.

[27 : 22] He's talking about the little household puppy dogs that there would be in a house that would be playing with the children and that would be around the table. And when he says so he's not using a necessarily derogatory term when he's calling her a dog.

He's basically saying here's the picture. You're coming to the table to the master's table and you expect the master to take the bread on the table which the children are going to eat and you expect him to give that bread which is for the children to you.

And that is the picture by which Jesus clearly described the true situation.

She had no right whatsoever to ask the God of Israel to help her on this occasion in that she had never respected or worshipped the God of Israel.

Now here's her faith but Lord yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

[28 : 43] Where's the faith in that statement? Well the faith first of all lies in she's recognizing that God is the master rewarder.

And that is the key element in somebody coming to faith in Jesus. Hebrews puts it like this faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.

And it tells us that faith it is by faith that we believe that God is and that he is the rewarder of everyone who truly seek him.

So the very first step of faith is not only believing that there is one true living God the God of the Bible but by coming to him and seeking him and seeking his help and recognizing him to be the Lord and that's exactly what this woman was doing.

You would expect that if this woman was to act according to her heathen faith or her heathen religion she would have walked away in a rage. She would have said this is exactly what I expected from you Israelites and yet she didn't because she did recognize the Lord as God.

[30 : 00] She actually believed that God was the master and she was actually coming to him as the master. She was coming to him also recognizing that she actually did not have any rights.

She had absolutely no rights. And she said to the Lord I don't expect God to take the gift for his children but I'm simply asking for what mercy there is.

God is God is a bit like the prodigal son isn't it when he came back home and he was going to say to his father father I have sinned against heaven and against you and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son make me like one of your higher servants.

And this woman is simply saying that I have no rights but I'm prepared to recognize that God is the master.

I'm prepared to recognize that you are the Lord. And when we come to faith in Jesus Christ that is what we do recognize. We accept him as our savior and as our Lord.

[31 : 21] We admit that we have no rights. we have lived our lives worshipping other things in all the wrong places doing all the wrong things. We're admitting our need and our guilt and our faults and our sin before him and yet we're saying to the Lord, Lord, please give me the mercy that you have.

Whatever mercy you have. And it's at that point we discover the enormity of God's mercy to those who ask him. Have you discovered that today?

That woman went away and her prayer was answered. She asked in faith. It was a faith that was determined to rest in Jesus Christ.

It was a faith that clutched him, that laid hold of him and that would not let him go. it was a faith that pleaded and a faith that believed.

A faith that recognized, I deserve nothing. But a faith that simply rested in what mercy the Lord was prepared to give to her.

[32 : 41] And that's what faith is. We think of strong faith. faith. But faith is faith because it rests in Jesus Christ. Today, Christ asks every one of us to come to him in that same faith, in that humility, in that recognition of where we have gone wrong, and he promises us, he promises us that as we ask him in faith, we will receive.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we give thanks for what we've been able to think about today. We pray that you will bless it to us now, and pardon our many sins, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.