

Great Faith

Purpose

To discover how faith can be found in one who is not a part of the community.

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-29.

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV)

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

27 "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

28 Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Matthew 15:21-28 (KJV)

21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.

23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.

24 But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

25 Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.

26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

27 And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

August 17	Psalm 17:1-7
August 18	1 Kings 3:16-27
August 19	Acts 5:12-16
August 20	Matthew 9:27-31
August 21	Galatians 3:23-29
August 22	Mark 7:24-29
August 23	Matthew 15:21-28

Seeing the Need

I am not what someone would call an avid movie watcher. A trailer or preview of a film will often satisfy my curiosity, especially if I know the general plot of that type of movie. *“Enough,”* starring Latin actress Jennifer Lopez, is an exception. The movie’s subtitle is “Everyone Has a Limit.” Although it did not receive high marks by movie critics or break box office records, it spoke to me. In the movie, Slim (Jennifer Lopez) is a young and attractive single woman working as a waitress at a restaurant in a large city. She meets a handsome but not so honest young man named Mitch who is a customer at the restaurant. A friendship develops between the two that soon leads to marriage and later the birth of a daughter. Years later, the marriage begins to sour as Slim discovers that

Mitch is having an extramarital affair. Frustrated and upset, she threatens to leave, only to be physically abused by her husband and told that his financial support of the family entitles him to come and go as he pleases. The abuse escalates into further verbal and physical attacks against her and any relative who tries to help her.

Desperate, depressed, and running out of options, Slim decides to leave the house with her young daughter out of fear for their physical safety. She changes her name and appearance and takes refuge in an isolated and cheap hotel. Later her abusive husband finds her and she narrowly escapes with her life and that of her daughter. She later flees to another state, only to be eventually found again by the sadistic husband. Desperation increases as Slim discovers that her credit cards and other sources of money have been frozen. A candid conversation with an elderly lawyer informs her that no crime has been committed and even the police cannot help her situation. Recognizing that she can no longer live in fear and hiding, Slim decides to fight back in order to save herself and the life of her young daughter. As with most good thriller movies, she wins.

What drew and kept my attention in this movie was watching the bulldog tenacity and determination of this battered woman to break out of a terrible situation. For the sake of her daughter’s future, she let nothing and no one deter her. This Bible lesson explores a powerful story of a Canaanite woman whose faith allowed nothing to prevent her from going

into the presence of Jesus. Her great faith yielded her great results.

A Canaanite Woman's Plea

This account from Matthew's Gospel is also found in Mark 7:24-30. In it, we find Jesus again in what some would see as forbidden territory. The regions of Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities and steeped in Canaanite paganism. The text does not tell us what Jesus' purpose was in visiting this area. However, Matthew says that a Canaanite woman from the region came out and began to cry out to Jesus. Mark corroborates this story, saying that she was of Greek heritage and a Syrophenician woman, meaning that she was born somewhere in the Syrian Phoenicia area.

Her cry was desperate and direct: "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession" (Matthew 15:22). It was the cry of a mother's heart seeking help for her sick daughter. Her persistence shows the level of her pain. What would Jesus do and how would he respond to this particular crisis?

The fact that this woman cried out to Jesus shows his renown throughout the region. When people saw the miracles and heard the teachings of Jesus, his fame almost instantly catapulted. Mark says that after Jesus had cast out a demon in a person at Capernaum, "the news about him spread throughout the entire region of Galilee" (Mark 1:28). On another occasion we read that the people heard him "with delight" (Mark 12:37). In response to why they did not arrest Jesus, the Temple guards told the

Pharisees that, "No one has ever spoken the way he does" (John 7:46). Jesus' reputation had without doubt spread across the nation and beyond.

Mark points out in his account of this encounter that when Jesus went into the region, he sought to be discreet and keep a low profile, yet "he couldn't hide" (Mark 7:24). Notoriety on any level can have its ups and downs. It is certainly nice to be appreciated and recognized for a quality or an accomplishment. People need to be affirmed. On the other hand, fame and public recognition can be taxing on a person. Jesus' "celebrity" status translated into a constant schedule of ministering to the hurts and needs of people. He sometimes taught the multitudes in a boat on the sea so as not to be thronged by the crowd (Matthew 13:2; Luke 5:3). On other occasions, Jesus retreated to secluded areas in order to recuperate and spend time with God.

This Canaanite woman had heard about Jesus. She may have even seen him at some point. Whatever the case, she was not about to miss the moment; neither would she let her Canaanite ancestry and history as Israel's foe distract her. Her desperate cry clearly says that she knew that help and hope would be found in Jesus. Her daughter was suffering "terribly" and needed immediate attention. Any parent who has ever experienced a sick or suffering child with seemingly no relief in sight can empathize with this cry of hopelessness and utter frustration. However, our hope in times like this is found in the assurance that God is concerned and hears

the cries of the righteous. We must never lose this hope.

We can only speculate about why Jesus “didn’t respond to her at all” (verse 23). Perhaps he did not hear her, or maybe he was trying to assess her situation. The good news, however, is that this woman would be heard and her problem would be solved. This brings to our attention the reality of God’s timing in our lives. God doesn’t always respond to our problems in our time and the way we think the Lord should respond. Yet faith comforts and assures us of things hoped for and even provides the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). It is the foreknowledge that God loves and promises to be with us in life’s most uncertain times. For those who might be at their wits end, hold on!

Does it ever seem to you that God at times does not hear your prayers? What do you do about it?

The Disciples’ Request

After this Canaanite woman shouted for Jesus to show mercy upon her, the disciples immediately took offense and urged Jesus to “Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us” (verse 23). As a minister, my first thought is, what’s going on here? The woman was frantic and at her wits end because of a sick daughter, yet she got a direct rebuttal from people who were supposedly representing God. This rebuttal may have been justified in the minds of these disciples because she was outside the Jewish covenant. Although Jesus’ comments would challenge her right to receive God’s covenant blessings, nonetheless

the disciples were seemingly not concerned enough about her plight to even talk with her about the matter. Her constant shouting for help was annoying and perhaps even embarrassing to them. Their solution was to just “send her away.” In their minds this would somehow have solved the problem and allowed them to go about their business. They had clearly not heard the cry of the needy, yet Jesus cared enough to stop and engage in conversation with the woman.

We may not always agree with people for whatever reason, yet a listening ear sometimes does wonders. Taking the time to listen to another person’s story is an expression of concern for them and their situation. It also allows the person to vent his or her feelings and perhaps get a clearer perspective about their dilemma. I have counseled people over the years and offered them what I felt was very little constructive advice, only to have these persons gratefully and humbly thank me for just listening. My concern and willingness to offer them a listening ear and an open heart satisfied them as a meaningful counseling session.

In verse 24 Jesus seemingly speaks to the woman about the rights of covenant believers. Those who are outside the Jewish covenant are forbidden and thus not entitled to the promises of God. Some Bible scholars see this act as an initial part of God’s plan of redemption to the world. Thus Jesus’ original mission was only to the lost house of Israel. However, after the resurrection of Christ,

God engrafted the Gentiles as branches from a wild olive tree into the family of God and as children of Abraham (See Romans 11:17). After the resurrection, Jesus commanded the disciples to go into the entire world and make more disciples. For this desperate Canaanite woman, the urgency of her immediate need warranted Jesus' special consideration to hear her cry.

The woman's second cry for help ("Lord, help me," verse 25) again was challenged by Jesus telling her that "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs" (verse 26). This rebuttal would have caused many seekers to have given up at this point. However, her need and desperation again overrode any circumstances that might try and challenge her actions. The words "children's bread" refers to the rights of those who had legal and ancestry heritage to the Jewish covenant. Jesus' use of the word "dogs" has long been a source of debate and confusion among scholars. Some have tried to soften this word, understanding it to mean cute little puppies. Others understand this word as simply the vernacular of the day. Still others go so far as to see this as a cultural and insensitive misstep on the part of Jesus. However we interpret this word, the message is clear. This woman was forbidden to share in the blessing of the covenant.

Her persistence made a final defense when she said, "Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their master's table" (verse 27). We cannot overlook her refusal to take no for an answer. She did not claim to be a daugh-

ter of Abraham nor did she deny her heritage as a Gentile. Instead, she looked beyond the Law and covenant and appealed to the goodness of Jesus. The children's bread might be only for the Israelites, yet she claimed her portion of God's love saying, "even the dogs eat the crumbs" that fall off the table. Such a persistent faith demanded a response.

What are some things that hinder you in your quest to know Christ?

Jesus' Answer

Up to this point, the disciples had apparently been without comment. We can only speculate as to their attitude and feelings about Jesus' open conversation with the woman. Very likely it was similar to that of the Samaritan woman. Hence what Jesus said next would surely have bewildered them. Jesus stopped his back and forth conversational exchange with the woman and complimented her persistent faith. "Woman, you have great faith" (verse 28). The word "great" suggests that she had a level of belief and confidence in Jesus that went beyond the ordinary. She had settled it in her mind that Jesus was the answer to her problem. No legal or religious protocol or even the corrective and instructive words of Jesus would hinder her actions. She had no disrespect or antagonism toward Jesus and the disciples or even the Jewish covenant, but she had a surety within her heart that grace in her time of need could only be found at the feet of Jesus. His answer to her was, "It will be just as you wish" (verse 28). Jesus heard and answered her persistent prayers. Mark's account says that Jesus told her

to go home because the demonic spirit had left her daughter (Mark 7:29).

The object of our faith always makes a difference. Who and what we put our trust in determines the results we receive. Furthermore, who and what we choose to trust also determines the extent and level of the blessings we receive. If we put our trust in ourselves or the best of human ingenuity, we only reap the benefits of trusting in these sources. This is not always bad. The point is, however, that if we put our faith and trust in God, we reap the blessings and benefits we find only in a relationship with God. This was the success of the Canaanite woman along with the heroes and heroines of the faith (see Hebrews 11). Through their uncompromising and unrelenting faith in God, these pioneers “conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, realized promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped from the edge of the sword, [and] found strength in weakness” (Hebrews 11:33-34). These saints looked beyond their circumstances and saw faith’s promise to those who will not give up.

God still responds to our faith! If we learn anything from this persistent woman, it is that faith is color and culture

blind. While God is no respecter of persons, God is a respecter of faith. The Hebrews’ writer tells us that it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6). Get serious about your faith! Take time this week to make an honest inventory of yourself and how much you trust and rely on God to help you in the daily needs of life. Who do you turn to when disaster strikes in your life? How sure are you that God will provide when these difficult times come? Trust God when it is hard to trust. Remember that God cares enough to stop and commune with you. The Lord will speak to your deepest need. Our faith in God assures us that in spite of how things might appear, our future is always hopeful when we stand on heaven’s eternal promises.

How has your faith in God enabled you to weather the storms of life? What can you do to increase your faith in God?

Merciful God, in the cry of the songwriter we pray, “My faith looks up to thee, thou lamb of Calvary, Savior Divine! Now hear me while I pray, take all my guilt away, O let me from this day be wholly thine.” In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.