

“Great Faith from an Undeserving Heart”

Matthew 15:21-28

April 28, 2019

The title of my message this morning is *“Great Faith from an Undeserving Heart.”* Now at first glance those two things may not seem to go together. Think of someone who you would say has great faith. Its probably a person who has demonstrated spiritual maturity, probably a person of bold and confident prayer. You’re probably not thinking of someone who has just taken their first spiritual step, someone who has very recently been known for their sinful lifestyle and has no spiritual growth to speak of.

Typically, we assume that great faith only comes from a great man or woman of God; that great faith is the fruit of great character and spirituality as though the greatness of the person is the source of great faith. But what we are about to discover here in Matt 15, is that Jesus identifies a woman as having great faith who has nothing impressive to speak of as a religious, moral, or spiritually mature person. She would have been viewed by God’s people as a woman with an impoverished heart before God—the kind of person who has come right out of the world. The only demonstration of faith that she has expressed is a humble dependence on God’s mercy from what she knows is an undeserving heart.

So what makes great faith? **Great faith is determined not by the quality of the person who believes, but rather by seeing the greatness of God in light of our insufficiency.** The result of grasping both our insufficiency and all-sufficiency of God is that we don’t trust at all in ourselves but trust wholly and completely in God. That is great faith—putting all of our hope in God.

Here’s what I believe we should take away from today’s passage:
The kind of faith that God loves to honor is faith that comes from an impoverished heart that places the entirety of its hope in God’s sufficiency, leaving no room for self-reliance.

Let’s make 4 observations about this woman who comes to Jesus in Mt 15:

1. **She is an outsider (21-22).**

We know from vss. 21-22 that this is a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon. This means that she has at least three things against her. 1) She is a Gentile whom the Jews considered unclean. 2) He is not only a Gentile, but a Gentile from the region of Tyre and Sidon, cities that were notoriously denounced by Jewish Rabbis and OT prophets alike for their gross paganism and idolatry.¹ Josephus, a prominent Jewish historian, referred to the people of Tyre as the Jews’ “bitterest enemies.”² 3) This woman is referred to as a Canaanite, a term that immediately brings to mind that she is a descendent of Israel’s enemies that were to have been driven out of the Promised land. Furthermore, the fact that she is a woman in the culture of that day further diminishes her hope of being influential.

From a Jewish perspective, this woman has everything against her, the least likely person to receive mercy and blessing from the God of Israel. She has no rightful claim to the covenant promises of God.

2. **She is in desperate circumstances (vs. 22).**

Verse 22 tells us that she pleaded for Jesus to have mercy on her because her daughter was cruelly demon-possessed. With her child experience unrelenting torture from a demon, surely this woman would have exhausted every possible resource in her region, yet her pagan gods proved unable to deliver her. Ironically, she probably worshiped Astarte, the goddess of stone. Stones cannot hear nor can they act. Their only “power” is to crush those cast under them.

But apparently, she has heard of Jesus who not only has the power to heal but to also cast out demons with just a word. The fact that

¹ R.C. Sproul, *Mark*, pg. 170

² R.T. France, “NICNT: The Gospel of Matthew, pg. 592.

she refers to Jesus as the “Son of David” indicates that His reputation as God’s anointed as preceded Him even into this pagan territory.

So this woman throws off all religious and political prejudices to goes in desperate search of Jesus. Perhaps she could persuade Him to have mercy on her suffering child.

3. **She is humble** (24-25).

In Vs. 25, she bows down before Jesus pleading, “Lord, help me.” She knows she doesn’t have a right to demand anything of Jesus. In vs. 24 Jesus says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In other words, the covenant blessings of Yahweh, are for the covenant people of God. Jesus is pointing out the obvious fact that she is undeserving of God’ mercy.

We know that she is humble because she doesn’t take offense when Jesus points out her impoverished standing before God. Proud people take offense when we suggest that they are undeserving of something—anything. She knows she has no credibility before God. Her only hope is that Jesus Himself will be merciful.

4. **She believes Jesus is able to meet her need** (22-23, 25-26, 28).

The fact that she took the risk of rejection to come to Jesus is evidence that she believes He can help, if only He is willing. Yet, what’s the best way to know if a person’s faith is genuine? Isn’t it that person’s persistence when their faith is tested? Notice the persistence of this woman’s faith. In vs. 22, she states her need and cries out for Jesus to have mercy on her. In vs. 23 we are told that the disciples were annoyed by her constant pleas. In vs. 25 when Jesus gives a good reason to not help her, she bows down before Jesus and begs, “Lord, help me!” Again in vs. 26, when Jesus reminds her that its not appropriate to take food away from your children and throw it to the dogs, she persists in pleading with Jesus to show her the mercy and kindness that even animals receive.

Why? Because she believes that Jesus is the only one that can save her daughter from the clutches of Satan.

Finally, her faith is not only proven through her persistent prayer when it was put to the test, it is also affirmed by Jesus in the end as great faith as her daughter is healed (vs. 28).

Now that we understand the background of who this woman is, let’s address the thing that really bothers us about this passage. Jesus initial response to this woman is a little unsettling, isn’t it. He appears to be cold and indifferent to this heart-broken woman with a suffering child. He seems to ignore her at first as though He is uncaring or even rude. And then He refers to her people as “dogs”!?

Let me remind you that when we encounter something in Scripture that is awkward or unsettling, we should be careful not to brush it aside or simply ignore. It is there for a reason so we ought to investigate it to discover what the Spirit of God is bringing to our attention.

So what’s going on here? What is Jesus doing? He is pressing the obvious tensions and hostilities between the Jews and Gentiles to the show not only the true nature of this woman’s heart, but also show us the true nature of genuine faith.

Let me explain. Jews considered themselves “children” of God but they referred to Gentiles as “dogs,” a derogatory way of referring to them as unclean. However, Jesus doesn’t use the typical word for the half-wild scavengers that they most often associated them with. Rather, He uses the word for little dogs, or household pets. He’s using the image of a household where both children and pets live.

Now, this doesn’t resolve the tension. Even dog-lovers would hardly take it as a compliment to be compared to any kind of animal. What Jesus is saying is that what rightfully belongs to the children, the heirs, of the household, should not be given to the little dogs who have no right of inheritance. No good father would take food away from His children to feed the pets instead. What Jesus is doing is pressing home the fact that this woman does

not rightfully deserve the blessing of the God of Israel. She's not a member of the family. She's not an heir.

What's most striking about this encounter is not how Jesus responds to her, but how she doesn't respond to Jesus. She doesn't recoil and take offense to what Jesus says. She doesn't even wince when Jesus highlights how undeserving she is of Yahweh's mercy. In fact, she agrees with Jesus when she says, "Yes, Lord...but even the [little] dogs feed on the crumbs that fall from their master's hand." That is, "You're right, Lord. I don't deserve anything. I'm simply pleading for you to have mercy on me."

This woman has abandoned all pride. Her faith is void of pride. How do we know that? Because pride takes offense at the truth. Pride always recoils at the suggestion that we are undeserving, even of mercy. What's so ironic, is that many of us are more likely to take offense at Jesus' response to this woman, than the woman herself was. What does that reveal about our own hearts? Why do we believe that we, or any other human being, somehow deserve God's kindness when our sin has alienated us and made us hostile toward God? We are no more deserving of God's mercy and kindness than a murderer on death row deserves HD tv or exotic food.

Jesus is looking for people today like this woman who see, understand, and grasp their impoverished, undeserving condition before God, yet trust entirely in His mercy alone to save them.

Now, don't get so distracted with the term "dogs" and the social tensions in the conversation that you miss Jesus ultimate response to this woman in vs. 28: ***"Then Jesus said to her, 'O woman, your faith is great; and it shall be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed at once."***

Why is this woman's faith great? Is it because she has an impressive resume before God? Is it because she is a woman of great moral uprightness or a spiritual elite? No. Her faith is great because it is absolutely void of any confidence in herself and relies entirely on the mercy of God.

The kind of faith that God loves to honor is faith that comes from an impoverished heart that places the entirety of its hope in God's sufficiency, leaving no room for self-reliance.

There's one more thing I want to show you, not so much from this passage, but from the context that surrounds it. The key to understanding this passage is seeing this woman's humble response in contrast to the Pharisees' religious pride in the previous passage. Do you remember how at the beginning of chapter 15, the Pharisees were offended because Jesus' disciples did not follow their tradition of ceremonial handwashing. But Jesus made it clear that what makes a person clean or unclean is not a matter of works or traditions or anything external, but what comes out of the heart. What a contrast this unclean woman is to the Pharisee's who trusted in their own works. This woman has great faith. The Pharisees have dead faith. This woman relied entirely on the mercy of Jesus. The Pharisee trusted in themselves.

In the portion that follows our passage (29-31), the Gentiles are streaming to Jesus, bringing with them those who were lame, crippled, blind and mute, and they laid them at Jesus' feet and He healed them.

Just like this woman, every person that Jesus healed was desperate. They knew that apart from a miracle, there was no hope at all for them to be delivered from their affliction. These healings are a perfect picture of the same attitude of humble desperation we need regarding our spiritual crisis. No amount of money, no Dr. at Mayo Clinic, no regiment of good choices or better behaviors can cure our terminal spiritual cancer.

Yet how is it that we could be completely spiritually sick and impoverished? God is holy and His standard is one of perfect righteousness. Yet, since the garden of Eden, every person has been born sinful. As a result every person sins and the wages or consequences of that sin is death, eternal separation from God (Rom 6:23). Our sin has alienated us from God because the Bible says *"all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags"* (Isa 64:6). What this means is that because we are sinful at the core, wanting to live our lives independently of God, everything we do (apart from Christ) is out of a heart of rebellion against Him,

regardless of whether we call them “good works.” So there’s nothing we can do on our own to change our status before God.

This is where so many people stumble because our culture tells us to believe that we are basically good apart from dealing with our sin. For some, it is offensive to suggest that there is nothing good in them as a sinner to attract God’s favor. Yet the apostle Paul Himself said, *“I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh...”* (Rom 7:18). So the question is, does the truth about your sin offend you or does it make you desperate enough to humble yourself before God and plead for His mercy in Christ?

The good news of Jesus is no value to us until we understand how desperately we need His rescue. Yet when we humble ourselves and come to Jesus with empty-handed faith, realizing we have nothing to offer, we are finally free to receive God’s great love in sending Christ to bear the penalty of our sin so that His perfect justice would be satisfied and mercy would be made available to every sinner who embraces Christ.

The Bible says that “God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Notice the Bible doesn’t say that we demonstrate our goodness before God. Rather, God demonstrates His goodness, His mercy and love toward us.

Perhaps the best way to summary of this truth is the first beatitude: ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3)***. Who does the kingdom of heaven belong to? Those who know that they are absolutely spiritually bankrupt, and because they know they can do nothing to resolve their destitute situation before God, they throw themselves completely on God’s mercy. How blessed is the one who gets how desperate he is for God’s mercy and abandons all else to trust in God alone—for to Him the kingdom of heaven is granted.

The kind of saving faith that God rewards with heaven, is the faith that comes from an impoverished heart and knows it does not deserve God’s mercy nor does it have any righteousness or pride to stand on before God, nor can it offer anything in exchange for His favor. It simply throws its entire hope fully and completely on the mercy of God—the mercy provided

through the cross of Jesus Christ, where Jesus hung in our place, and took upon Himself the judgment and wrath of God for our sin. So that, when we believe in Christ and come under His loving authority like a bride under her husband, our debt of sin is paid and we inherit all the riches of God’s kindness, mercy, and favor.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, putting no confidence in yourself but only in Christ, and you will be saved.