

Great Faith?

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Date: 02 November 2014

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[0 : 00] I want to start if I may by asking you what you think it might look like for someone to have great faith. What does that look like?

I love the story of George Muller, I don't know if you're familiar with it, he was a German minister who moved to Bristol where he opened an orphanage in which in the course of his life they provided care and a home for over 10,000 different children.

He didn't stop there, he established I think 117 schools which educated 120,000 kids in different ways. He also organized the distribution of 300,000 Bibles and one and a half million New Testaments in different parts of the world when they were much harder to come by and travel was much more difficult.

But the reason that George Muller is famous is that in all of that time he never once asked anybody for money. He got no government funding, he never sought a donation, he just prayed and asked God to provide them with what they needed and then somehow miraculously all of this cash came flooding in.

One day apparently the orphanage didn't have any food but they got all the kids to sit down for lunch anyway and then they prayed. And as they said, ah men, the town's baker knocked on the door and donated enough bread to feed all of the children for that day and the next.

[1 : 26] Exactly the same moment the milkman's cart broke down outside and because there was no refrigeration and all the milk would go off he donated all of his milk to the orphanage as well.

And there are loads of stories like that when you read about George Muller in total with that ever asking, he raised for his work the equivalent in today's money of about 90 million pounds.

Now there's no doubt that that's an amazing story. But here's my question, is that what it means to have great faith? Is that where we all need to be this morning before God and if we're going to receive the bread and wine from the Lord's table?

Do you know there are certainly people who would say yes, you've got to be just like that. Herbert and Catherine Scheibel are a couple from Pennsylvania and they're members of an extreme church that believes it's wrong for Christians to take medicine when they're sick.

All you need to do they say is pray and if you have the faith then Jesus will definitely heal you. And so when their kids get sick they don't go to the doctor, they just pray.

[2 : 37] And some people admire them and think they have amazing faith. And others call them animals because in the last five years two of their kids have died because their parents refused to give them really very basic medical treatment.

So what is great faith? If we have any desire at all to be people of faith we need to know God's answer to the question.

And do you know there's only one place in anywhere in any of the Gospels that Jesus describes someone as having great faith. And it's this woman that we've just read about in Matthew chapter 15.

He says in verse 28 there, woman you have great faith. That makes her unique in all the Bible so there's a lot we could learn from her this morning.

We're going to get God's view on what truly great faith looks like and thankfully it looks nothing at all like the shybles. So what is it? Here's the first point.

[3 : 38] Great faith worships Jesus as Lord. Very simple. Great faith worships Jesus as Lord. Let's read again from verse 21.

Leaving that place Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him crying out Lord, son of David have mercy on me, my daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.

Whenever you're reading the Bible it's worth looking out for anything that we're told about where things are happening and which people are involved and those details are pretty key here. The geography in you'll see in verse 21 is that Jesus is in the region of Tyre and Sidon. That means if we were watching a film all the really scary music would start playing in the background because the cities of Tyre and Sidon were famous for being enemies of God and of his people.

They were successful in business, pretty wealthy, they were renowned for their nightlife but in their arrogance they'd always stood opposed to God.

[4 : 46] And now Jesus had decided to go there. It's a bit like if the Archbishop of Canterbury would decide to go on a trip to Mecca. It's all a little bit controversial, the tension is right.

And that sense is amplified when Matthew tells us that the woman in the middle of the story is a Canaanite. Back then the Canaanites and the Jews weren't exactly the best of friends.

In fact the Canaanites weren't only political and military enemies of God's people, they were spiritual enemies too. Time and again in the Old Testament it was the idolatry of the Canaanites that sucked Israel away from the true worship of God.

And so it's a big surprise when this non-Jewish woman in this non-Jewish place becomes one of the first people in the whole of Matthew to work out who Jesus really is.

So do you see it there in verse 22? She gives him two names. Lord, that can just be a title of respect like sir but it can also be the title of God, the creator and the ruler of all.

[5 : 53] And that seems to be the sense in which she uses it here. And she also calls him the son of David. This one's a Jewish title. God had promised in the Old Testament that he would one day send into the world a descendant of King David whose kingdom and throne would be established forever.

And somehow we're not told how this woman has realized that Jesus is the ruler of everybody and forever that God has promised.

So she's worked out who Jesus is. But for her it's important to see that this isn't some abstract and intellectual idea because in the next few verses she takes her response to the next level.

In verse 25 it says in our translation she came and knelt before Jesus. So the word that Matthew uses, the word for worship, that's how the word gets translated in chapter 14 in Matthew.

She came before Jesus and she worshipped him. So this is a very unlikely woman and we don't even know her name.

[7 : 02] But at this point in Matthew she becomes the model for us of the kind of response that Matthew wants to see in all of his readers of his gospel.

Whereas she falls before Jesus and worships him as her Lord and as her King.

And it's worth saying that in this section of Matthew, that makes this woman stand out from the crowd, write a lot. Matthew has five big sections to his gospel. We've jumped right into the middle of the middle one which is a bit unfair on you I'm afraid but that's what we're doing this morning.

And this middle section starts at the end of chapter 13 and runs to the end of chapter 18. And one of the big issues in this section of Matthew is the way that different people are responding to Jesus. And one of the really depressing things as you read it is that so much of the response to Jesus is negative. Everybody is getting it wrong all of the time.

[7 : 59] So in chapter 13 the people of his own town take offense at Jesus. In chapter 15 the Pharisees do the same. They've already decided that they think he's possessed by the devil and they're trying to kill him.

Even Peter, the kind of the ringleader and leader of the disciples at this stage has been rebuked in chapter 14 for being of little faith.

That same charge, being of little faith, will be fired at all of the disciples in chapter 17 in a couple of chapters time. But here in the middle of this middle section of Matthew, in deliberate contrast to the zero faith of the Pharisees and the small faith of the disciples were given this woman as someone who's actually getting it right.

So there were the Pharisees, the religious leaders of God's people, hugely respected and admired by their contemporaries.

They weren't like the baddies in the pantomime. People didn't boo and hiss when they came onto stage. Everybody thought that they were getting it right. But for all of their religious privilege, for all of their theological learning, turns out they know less about true faith than a woman from, well, the

most pagan place on the planet.

[9 : 27] And that is because truly great faith is not in the first instance about your academic qualifications or your religious background.

It's all about Jesus and what you make of him. So the first question to reflect on for us, I guess, this morning would be, well, how am I responding to Jesus in my life right now?

Not asking if your parents took you to church, if they did, that would be a great thing. But that's not particularly the question. I'm not asking how much you know about the Bible, although I hope you know a lot.

But where are you at with the person of Jesus himself? I'm sure in a gathering like this there will be people here who have never really thought about Jesus all that much before.

Maybe you're just here this morning because a friend invited you to church. If that's you, you're really, really welcome. There'll be others here, I'm sure, for whom over the years Jesus has been kind of hidden by layer upon layer upon layer of religious packaging and some bad religious experiences in churches.

[10 : 36] So that now when we talk about Jesus, you're not quite sure where the reality stops and whether the stuff you've built up in your brain starts. I hope there's others here who long to be on fire for Jesus.

But wherever we're at, we're being reminded that true faith is as simple as this. It worships, it acknowledges Jesus as the one who is the Lord of all.

The other day my kids were given some balloons at a party. So they had great time blowing them up. Do you ever do this? You blow up. It's still quite exciting. Actually one of the great things about having kids is that you can be a kid yourself, at least part of the time, which I love.

So we blew up the balloons, we tied knots and we patted them around and played tennis. We tried to keep you up and see how many times we could keep up. It was all great and fun and brilliant.

Then the shrieks of laughter, the hoots, and someone got slapped in the face by mistake when we were aiming for the sort of thing that might have happened.

The next morning we woke up and one of the balloons, have you ever seen what used to be a blown up balloon? They just look so pathetic, don't they? They're just deflated, they've gone all a bit wrinkly and you sort of try and start the game and it sort of flops into heat on the floor.

[11 : 53] As I saw that the next morning, all deflated and wrinkly, it struck me how easy it is to have a deflated view of Jesus.

To come around to church on a Sunday and to worship him as the Lord of all, all blown up and it looks fantastic. It's great and it feels wonderful.

But then through the week, so easy isn't it to live almost as though someone's let the air out of him? And so all Christians, I guess, make this mistake every week.

We don't trust Jesus as the Lord of all. When hard times come we don't obey him. In the places we find that hard we don't worship him.

We live our hearts to other things. So I've been helped this week just to come back to square one really and to be reminded by this woman, this unlikely teacher, that Jesus is the Lord of all.

[12 : 55] I've been encouraged to, I guess, take my place next to her on my knees in front of Jesus and just say, you are the Lord, you are the Son of David, you are the King, the eternal ruler of everyone and no matter how much I've mucked it up, I worship you and I want to worship you and please will you help me to do so.

It's the first mark of great faith. Here's the second. Great faith cries out to Jesus for mercy. So it worships him as the Lord of all and then it cries out to him for mercy.

I don't know if you're someone who likes to ask for help. Some men, for example, are very happy to wind down the window of their car and ask for directions when they're lost and going somewhere.

Other men are a little bit too proud for that and so we inflict upon our families hours and hours of driving around pretending that we know where we're going. It's troubling that Katrina's nodding.

That's all I'm saying. So we inflict on our families hours of driving around too proud to admit that we were lost. So some people like to ask for help, some people don't.

[14 : 07] But you'll know that just occasionally in life you come across a situation that is completely out of your control and when that happens it doesn't matter what kind of temperament you've got.

You just, you know that you need all the help that you can get and so you're happy to ask for it. That's the situation this woman finds herself in.

See how she expresses it in verse 22. Lord, Son of David, she says, have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.

Not just suffering but suffering terribly. And again in verse 25, much more simply but no less dramatically, Lord help me.

I was talking to a dad recently whose son was terribly sick and it is hard to imagine a more distressing situation for a parent than seeing your child suffer.

[15:03] Some of you may have been there. You know that you would do anything that you can for them. For this woman there's no NHS, there's nowhere to turn.

But somehow she's heard about this preacher from Galilee, this doer of wonderful deeds. And in him she's found hope. So she came and knelt before him and said, Lord, have mercy on me. You'll notice in the text that at first Jesus says nothing. Now think about why that's the case in a minute. But the disciples have had enough in verse 23 so they come to Jesus and urge him to send her away.

It's not quite clear whether they want Jesus to heal her first or just to get rid of her. But what is clear is that their motives are far from compassionate.

They say she cries out after us. And you get the sense that we don't like her very much Jesus.

She's interfering with us. She's too noisy for our comfort.

[16:06] Can't you just get rid of this woman? But this is a woman of great faith. And so instead of melting away quietly into the background, she perseveres since she bows in worship before Jesus and says, Lord, have mercy on me.

Lord, help me. This time Jesus does reply in verse 26. It's fascinating. He says it's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.

Children was a common name for the people of Israel, the Jews, and they used to love to call the Gentiles like this woman dogs. So Jesus is accommodating himself to the language of his day to say, I am the Jewish Messiah, first and foremost.

I came first for the people of Israel. They are my mission field right now. But what I want us to notice for now is this woman's reaction.

She doesn't say Jesus had a you refer to Gentiles as dogs. Don't you think it's a little bit politically incorrect in our day and age to go along with that sort of language?

[17:16] Instead she freely admits that she has no rights before Jesus. Jesus knows that she's not in any kind of position to make demands from him.

She has no claim to any sort of relationship with him. All she can do is entrust herself to his mercy. And so she says, yes, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

Or in other words, I'm not asking because I deserve anything, Jesus. But please be merciful to me anyway. And that's what makes her an example to us of great faith.

It's really interesting is that Jesus doesn't hold up the example of someone like George Miller who did such amazing things for God and say, well, there's your example of great faith. That's what you all got to live up to.

Rather he holds up a woman who did nothing more than get on her knees and ask for mercy. And the reason Matthew chose to place this story of this woman at this precise place in his gospel was to teach us that truly great faith will always begin and go on and end on its knees in front of Jesus asking for mercy.

[18:36] It's highly significant that this episode comes immediately after Jesus teaching about the problem of sin in verses 18 to 20. You may know that Jesus spends the first part of this whole chapter correcting the Pharisees.

And one of the big points he makes is that they've misunderstood what it means or what it is that makes someone unclean before God. They've been teaching that someone becomes unacceptable in God's eyes as a result of the things that they eat and as a result of the things that they touch as though the problem were out there somewhere.

But Jesus says no, the real problem is inside each of us. So go on to verse 18 with me for just a second. He says, the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart and these are what make someone unclean.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

These are what make someone unclean. The other day one of our kids came home from school with some sort of ink on their hands. I've no idea what they've been doing but there was ink everywhere.

[19 : 47] So we set to work. We sort of first ran it under the tap and rubbed a bit. Nothing came off. We tried soap. Nothing came off. We tried Swarphigan. Nothing came off.

Hot soap scrubbing really, really hard until we were nearly drawing blood. So somehow this ink did not come off our kids' hands. You'll have been there at some stage I'm sure.

It doesn't matter what you try, nothing seems to work. Now that's just ink and it does fade over time. But the question here is, well what do you do if you've got a stain on your heart that will never fade? A stain that's made up of all of those genuinely evil things that you've ever said or done.

All of the good things you chose not to do. The actions that you can't take back. The words when you reduce someone that you love. Someone you've promised to love, to tears.

[20 : 52] The thoughts of which you're rightly ashamed. What do you do if your heart is permanently stained by your failure to give God his due in your life?

Religion tells you to get out the scrubbing brush. It says to try and wash yourself clean by being a better person and going to church more often and entering, going on pilgrimage and entering into a new consciousness of the divine.

But true faith, truly great faith tells you something different because it realizes that the solution doesn't lie in us at all.

And so great faith falls instead to its knees and says Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. I know I don't deserve it, but please be merciful to me.

One question for us to reflect on then this morning is a pretty foundational one. Is that something that I've done? Have I come to Jesus on my knees and asked him for mercy?

[22 : 03] If you've never done that before, let me say today, there will be no better day than today to do it. No better day.

Just look at how Jesus responds to this woman. She says Lord have mercy on me and he says, verse 28, Jesus answered her woman you've got great faith, your request is granted and her daughter was healed from that very hour.

That's the picture of how Jesus responds to people like us when we fall to our knees before him in worship and ask him for mercy. It's a wonderful picture.

I was trying to imagine this week how that woman felt as she made her way home. There's no suggestion that her daughter was with her at the time. She was probably back at home if she was that sick.

So I suspect the mum ran home, don't you? Huff laughing, huff crying with delight and joy.

[23 : 08] I wonder if any doubts have rented her mind. Can it really be true? I don't know if she's not better, but she got there and she was better. Can you imagine the party the family would have had to celebrate?

Can you imagine the thankfulness in her heart? And I imagine that it will be with similar joy and thanksgiving that we would want to come to the Lord's table this morning as we remember how Jesus was willing to allow his body to be broken and his blood to be shed so that despite all of our failings, despite our ongoing inability to worship him properly as Lord, we might have mercy if we would ask for it.

We're going to sing a little bit later that song. It's one of my favourites at the moment, I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene. I wonder how he could love me, a sinner condemned unclean.

He took my sins and my sorrows. He made them his very own. He bore the burden to Calvary and suffered and died alone.

How marvellous. How wonderful is my Saviour's love for me.

[24 : 40] Second hallmark of great faith that cries to Jesus for mercy. We've got one more quick one I just wanted us to touch on. We just need to come back to the racial overtones that dominate the passage. We'll think about this a bit more tonight if you're able to come back.

But they reveal another way in which this episode points beyond itself to an even greater truth.

Another point, great faith in Jesus is open to all. I'm not entirely happy with the title but you can talk to me afterwards and give me a better one if you can.

But it tries to convey something about how this passage is something of a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Up until now, his focus has been almost exclusively upon his own people, the Jews.

It's always been God's plan to bless all of the nations of the world ever since he made the promise back in Abraham. But the way he purposed to do that was through his chosen people, the children, the Jews.

The people of Israel were to be a kingdom of priests through whom the knowledge and blessing of God would flow to the whole world. Israel failed drastically in that mission in the Old Testament.

[25 : 49] And so God promised that he would first work to rescue and restore his people and then through them again to bless the whole world.

So when Jesus came, he was born of Jewish parents and he was raised as a Jew, he was circumcised, he lived in obedience to God's law. When his ministry began, his first port of call was his own people, the Jews.

I was sent, he said, to the lost sheep of Israel. And even back in chapter 10, when he sends his disciples out on mission for the first time, he tells them to avoid the non-Jewish lands and to speak only to the lost sheep of Israel.

But his purpose was always that this new people of God that he was creating would be made up of people from every nation on earth. And there have been little hints of that already in Matthew.

As soon as he was born, wise men from the east came and worshipped him. In chapter 4, when Jesus began his ministry, it was in a place called Galilee of the Gentiles.

[26 : 55] In chapter 8, he healed the child of a Roman centurion in an episode that's very similar to this one. All of it confirming that Jesus is the son of Abraham through whom the God's blessing will reach the whole world.

But those moments so far have just been hints, they've just been exceptions to the rule that Jesus had come for the lost sheep of Israel.

I think it's a bit like a tap, you know how sometimes a tap drips because the wash has gone or something? Those early moments in Matthew, just like little drips drops out of the tap of God's blessing to the nations, they come, but they're just coming one drop at a time.

But with this episode, Jesus turns on the tap a bit further as he goes deliberately to a Gentile land and helps a Canaanite woman.

Then on the cross as Jesus dies and as he rises again, he turns the tap on further still so that this gospel will end with Jesus telling his disciples to go and make nations, disciples of all of the nations of the world.

[28 : 08] By the time we get to the book of Acts, the tap is on full blast as God's spirit is poured out, not just on Jews who receive Jesus as Lord but Gentiles too.

Paul is appointed as an apostle to the nations. In Romans he writes, I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it's the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew and then for the Gentile.

But the point is that here Matthew 15 is like a key staging post along the way of God blessing the nations of the world. The tap's not on full blast yet, but Jesus temporarily delayed healing this woman's daughter in order to teach his disciples that we're about to enter a new phase in God's dealings with the world.

In that sense this woman is a sign of things to come. She's a lesson for us. The great faith is now open to anybody and everybody because Jesus has come through all.

And again I hope that's an encouragement because it means that it doesn't matter who we are this morning, it doesn't matter what we've done. If we acknowledge Jesus as our Lord, if we cry to him for mercy then we too can be caught up in this overflow of God's salvation blessing to all the nations of the world.

[29 : 44] So I wonder if you've ever wanted to be a person of great faith. Loads of us I think feel inadequate when we hear the stories of people like George Miller. We think I could never have that much faith.

But that's to misunderstand the nature of great faith. Because the thing that makes great faith is not the quality of the believer, but the one in whom our faith is placed.

And the reason that we can stand before Jesus the Nazarene this morning, the reason we can receive the bread and the wine is not because there's anything very special about us, because

there isn't.

But because he is the Lord of all and because he delights, he delights to pour out his compassion on anyone and everyone who would ask him for mercy.

How marvelous, how wonderful. Because our Savior's love. Let's take a moment to pray together.

[31 : 08] Almighty God we do want to thank and praise you for your son, the Lord Jesus. We bow ourselves before him in worship because he is the Lord of all.

But supremely we praise you that though he was so great, he was willing to become like us.

He was willing to suffer and die, that he might pour out his love and mercy towards us.

We praise you for him. We love him. We know that we're completely inadequate in our worship of him.

And so we rejoice to remember afresh this morning that there is mercy and grace. And mercy and grace for all who come to him, whatever our weaknesses and whatever our failings.

[32 : 16] And we pray that you might strengthen us as we receive the bread and wine, that we might be helped again on this walk of faith to love him more for his namesake we pray.

Amen.