

An Unlikely Woman of Faith

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Date: 13 July 2025

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[0:00] Our scripture reading this morning is from Matthew chapter 15, verses 21 through 28. Matthew writes, 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.

And 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 the master's table. Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith.

[1:06] Be it done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly. This is the reading of God's word. We are starting a new series for the next several weeks on encounters with Jesus.

And this morning we're looking at an encounter with Jesus. It's always been one of my favorite stories in the Gospels. In this encounter, the woman shows such great humility that I've always been just kind of blown away by it.

But as I studied in this passage, there's so much more here than just humility, but even a way that helps us to see how we should pray.

I didn't set out to preach another sermon on prayer. If you've been here when I've preached a few times, it feels like I'm preaching a lot of sermons on prayer. That was not my intention. But I do believe the Lord is preparing St. Seas for a season of prayer.

As we talk with Corey in the session. So maybe the Lord has a word for us today about growing in our prayer lives. Especially as we're talking about this woman of great faith that Jesus talks about.

[2:17] So, yeah, I called the sermon title An Unlikely Woman of Faith. But that was a lot shorter than An Unlikely Woman of Faith who is great in prayer and has a lot to teach us. That was too long, so I shortened it there.

But as we look at the context of this passage, we see in verse 21, it says, Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

So this is an area north of where Jesus had been in Capernaum. It's about a four to six day journey, roughly 30 to 50 miles.

And it's in the modern day Lebanon, if you're wondering. It's also in the land of Phoenicia, which if you know anything about the Phoenicians, they had great cultural impact.

They're the ones that gave us the first alphabet. They were seafaring people with lots of trade, luxury goods like the cedars of Lebanon and a lot of other great things.

[3:17] So this was a very big cultural impact for this place. And Jesus and his disciples actually go up there to get away from the crowds.

He's going up there to be alone with his disciples. And Mark actually says in the parallel passage in Mark chapter 7 that he didn't want anyone to know that he was there.

He was actually in some ways trying to hide. It says he couldn't stay hidden. So Jesus and his disciples are withdrawing maybe to get a little rest and respite from all the crowds that had been following them, all the people wanting Jesus's attention.

And they go up to this land. And sure enough, there is yet another disruption as he's trying to withdraw. And the disciples are a little frustrated as we're about to see.

But in verse 22, it says, And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started crying to him. Now, Mark calls this lady a Gentile from Syrophenicia.

[4 : 22] Matthew, though, is actually writing to a Jewish audience. And so he spells out she's a Canaanite woman. This would have been a significant fact to a Jewish audience because the Canaanites were the ancient enemies of Israel, the ones that the Lord told them to drive out of the inhabited land of Canaan.

And they were enemies from then on out. So the unlikely part, this is a woman who would be seen as traditionally an enemy of the Jews.

Not only is she a Canaanite, and that makes her unlikely, but just the fact that she's a woman makes it unlikely that someone like Jesus would have interactions with her.

Now, when I say someone like Jesus, you've got to remember that at this point, when Jesus is in his ministry, there are some, like the Jewish religious leaders, they see Jesus as a troublemaker. You've got others that are just interested in all the miracles that he's doing and want the benefits of him. But you also have some people who think he is the Messiah that is going to come in power and might and overthrow the Roman government.

[5 : 36] And therefore, they want to make him king. All those things are happening so that, at the very least, you can say Jesus is a very important Jewish rabbi in their eyes.

And so it's really unlikely that Jesus would be having this conversation or interaction with a Canaanite woman. One way to think about it, as I think about unlikely interactions, you know, a lot of times we think about Mother Teresa and the way that she gave her life to the poorest of the poor in India.

And that is obviously very great. But in some ways, we kind of expect that from her being who she was. But what this would be more like would be more like Queen Margaret from the 11th century, who as a queen was having interactions like physical and personal interactions with the poor.

That would have been unheard of. We, to this day, still talk about that. If you go to the castle, you might hear about that. Very unlikely. That's more like what this would have been like for Jesus.

Some are wanting to make him a king. Others see him as the miracle worker. But it would have been a very unlikely interaction. One of the last people you think that Jesus would encounter.

[6 : 46] Now, we see that she comes out to him and it says that she was crying. This passage, one of the emphasis that it has, is that there is like this relentless, continual crying out that she's having.

In a loud voice. And she won't stop. She is being persistent. And one of the things that she says, she starts out, she's crying out, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.

Now, her address to Jesus here as Lord, it really could just be kind of a term of respect. That's possible. But she says, O Lord, Son of David.

This Canaanite woman is recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah. This is a title that would have been given to the Messiah.

She understands who he is. And so, we would say she comes to him really with theological accuracy. Recognizing exactly who he is.

[7 : 52] And maybe she thinks that by crying out to him and recognizing, I know who you are with theological accuracy. Maybe she will be heard.

Maybe he will help her. We kind of do this, don't we, when it comes to prayer. Like, we might not say it, but we instinctively think that if we use the right words, then maybe God will hear us.

And if he's not answering our prayers, maybe we just need to ask in a different way. Maybe I wasn't precise enough in my theology. And I think this is a good lesson for us.

She comes to him with precise theology. She's heard of him. Mark chapter 3 and Luke chapter 6.

There it is. In those two passages, it lets us know that there were people from Tyree who had come to listen to Jesus. To maybe even be healed by Jesus. So, he has a reputation even there.

[8 : 50] So, she knows who he is and what he can do. She has hope that he will do that for her. And so, she seeks him out.

And just remember, it's like he's trying not to be found, right? The disciples, at least, feel this way. Because, as you see, they try to get her to stop.

They're like, Lord, please tell her to stop. It says, they begged him. My wife has informed me that I have what some might call selective listening.

This is like we'd be driving in the van and one of the kids is just asking a question. And they keep asking the question. And they keep asking the question. And I was obviously focusing on driving,

keeping my family safe or whatever.

I was probably thinking about who's going to win Wimbledon today or something like that. But she's like, will you please answer him? And it kind of gets my attention. And that's what we see here.

[9 : 53] Except, Jesus isn't practicing selective listening. He's very intentional and thoughtful in everything. But the disciples are saying, will you please make her stop?

I was thinking about this. It's almost like if you have a teenager. And you're like trying to get their attention. Hey, Henry, hey. And they're like, oh, please don't call me out in public, right? It's like they're embarrassed that she is crying out to him.

They're like, annoyed? Please get her to stop. But that was how much her persistence was. But look what it says in verse 23.

But he did not answer her a word. That's odd, isn't it? Silence.

Not a word. Jesus, who doesn't practice selective listening, who is very intentional and thoughtful in everything that he does.

[10 : 55] When he is silent, we need to be asking the question, okay, what is he up to? What's going on here? What do you do when the Lord is silent? This is a fundamental question about prayer.

We've all felt it. Maybe there's a broken relationship or a problem at work. Maybe there's a sickness or a disease in the family. Maybe there are financial problems, job situation.

And the Lord doesn't seem to be answering our prayer. Why are you not listening, Lord? Are you even there? Our thoughts that we have in our heads and our hearts even.

But when it seems that the Lord is silent, our first response should be, what is God up to? What is he wanting me to learn? What am I not yet getting? Maybe we expect to be heard because of our theological accuracy.

Paul Miller, in his great book, *A Praying Life*, highly recommend this book. He addresses this passage in his book and is addressing the Lord's silence.

[12 : 06] And he says this, he says, During the silence is when relationship is formed. If the Lord answered right away, we'd never grow because we'd stop pursuing.

If he always answered right away, we would treat Jesus like a magic prayer machine. And that has been my experience. That if the Lord answers right away, I soon forget.

I soon forget that he even answered. There might be a quick moment of praise or maybe it lasts for a little season. But then I'm right back again to going my own way.

Thinking my own things. Trying to do things in my own way. But if it seems that the Lord is silent, it just means that you have to keep going. The story is not over yet.

The Lord is up to something. So let's keep reading this story and see what the Lord is up to. Verse 24. So the disciples are wanting him to send her away.

[13 : 06] She's crying out after us. They're frustrated. They were probably expecting a respite. You know, we've been there before where we're expecting to get a holiday or a rest. And someone or something won't leave us alone.

And we get frustrated like the disciples. But Jesus is very thoughtful and intentional. And he says in verse 24. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Well, that seems odd too. First he's silent. And then when he speaks, it seems like he's putting an extra barrier in the way between he and the woman.

He says, you recognize that I'm the Jewish Messiah. My responsibility is to the Jews. They are my priority. Why would Jesus say this? I mean, if you think about Jesus' ministry, he did make it clear on a couple of occasions like this one that his first priority and strategy was to the house of Israel.

I was sent to the Jews first. He even in Matthew chapter 10 sends the disciples, not to the Gentiles. He says, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. So we do know that was a little bit of the strategy of what's going on.

[14 : 14] But when you look at Jesus' ministry, he's already by this point healed the centurion servant who was a Gentile, Matthew chapter 8. He healed a demon-possessed man who was a Gentile, also in Matthew chapter 8.

And in John chapter 4, early in his ministry, he preaches the gospel to the Samaritans. After the Samaritan woman at the well, he meets her, she goes back and starts telling of who Jesus is and what he's told her.

And they come out to him, and then they start believing because of Jesus' word. And we see many people are saved. They believed in Samaria, who actually Samaritans might have at this time been worse enemies than a Canaanite woman would have been.

So why is Jesus saying this to her at this point? What is Jesus up to? Well, after he says this to her, look at her response. Verse 25. But she came and knelt before him, saying, Lord, help me.

She came and knelt before him. So this word knelt is a word that's commonly used for worship. In fact, every time this word is used in the King James Version, it's translated as worshiped.

[15:23] So it's like her first response to hearing this obstacle is to worship him. And she comes to him. She falls down. The word literally means to like kiss the hand or like kissing the ring.

She bows down, implying that it's worship. And she says, Lord, help me. She drops any formality. She's simply desperate for her little girl to get help.

J.C. Ryle comments on the little girl and says, Man, isn't that a good word?

So thankful for my praying mom and her praying mom. Where there's a praying mother, there's always hope. Because here she's crying out to Jesus in desperation.

Desperation is an element of prayer that we need to be okay with. We don't like feeling desperate. But that is such a big ingredient in prayer. We have to understand just how dependent we are on the Lord.

[16:39] Jesus said in John chapter 15 that apart from me, you can do nothing. And then he goes on to say, If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

We are completely dependent on the Lord. And as we are connected to him in utter dependence, we have prayers answered. We have to be okay with dependence.

And even crying out to Jesus in desperation. So in verse 26 then, we see Jesus' response. She says, Lord, help me.

And he answered, It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Third time. He's silent. He creates one barrier, it seems.

And now a third time? In her desperation, Jesus still doesn't give in to her request.

[17:42] He seems to put yet another obstacle in the way. Now, this is actually a controversial passage. They're like, is Jesus insulting her, calling her a dog?

Because in the ancient Near East, dogs were scavengers. It was one of the biggest insults to call someone a dog. The Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs.

The word here, though, is very curious. And I kind of hinted at this earlier. Jesus uses a word here that means puppy. Little dog. And she's showing that she has a context for a little dog that would actually even be at the house, sitting at the table.

It was kind of interesting. I did not know this. I knew that dogs or scavengers back then were not usually pets. But they could be. There were actually, in this area of Phoenicia, they have found, uncovered a dog cemetery, where they were like organized burial places for dogs.

There was probably, they think, for some kind of pagan worship. But they also have, in that Greco-Roman time, some households might have dogs as pets.

[18:56] But they have a, she has a context for this. And he says that you don't take the children's bread and throw it to the puppies, meaning like you don't prepare this meal and then just give it to the dogs.

You feed the children first. And her response, instead of getting offended, instead of being frustrated, she says, yes, Lord.

Yet even the dogs, the little puppies, eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. One of the things that could be going on, some commentators say that Jesus could be.

It's like he might be even looking over at her head to the disciples and saying his statement about, it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs, as if that's like a Jewish mindset, that he's kind of like reminding them, this is what you think.

But I'm about to interact with this woman in a different way. It could be that some have suggested this is actually a short parable that Jesus is giving because of some of the phrasing that he used.

[20:03] But whatever is going on here, the humility that she shows, in verse 28 she says, or verse 27, sorry, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.

She didn't try to refute the dog comment. Even though she's a woman that might have been called like a puppy, she doesn't worry about that. She responds with both humility and wisdom here.

She shows her humility. I'm unworthy. But even unworthy people can take what falls from the master's table.

She's demonstrating the very thing that Jesus has said in the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are the poor in spirit. She doesn't have a sense of entitlement. She doesn't have a sense of frustration or anger.

She's simply crying out to him in humility. Now, we often don't even approach God like this. And in our society, it's kind of interesting how many times, it's like we're putting Jesus on trial as if like we're doing him a favor by following him.

[21 : 20] We're doing you a favor by coming to church. We're doing you a favor by doing what you say in your word. When really, we need to understand that we are unworthy to have a relationship with the creator and sustainer of the universe.

Yet, he reached out to us. He pursued us. The creator and sustainer of the universe sent his only son to come live the life that we could not live and die the death that we deserve to die so that through him we could have a relationship with the heavenly father.

This woman demonstrates that true humility that says, I may be a dog, but you see me. This wisdom that she shows.

But even when there's a dog in the house, the dog will be fed the crumbs that fall from the table. She's saying, I'm not asking you to take food away from the children.

Crumbs from your table is enough to satisfy. Crumbs from your table will completely change our lives. Crumbs from your table is what my heart is desiring at this moment.

[22 : 38] Even the dogs get to feed from the crumbs that are from your table. Do we approach the Lord like this? Like better are crumbs from your table than anything that the world can offer?

And his response to her is, Oh woman, great is your faith. There are only two times in the Gospels that Jesus commends someone for having great faith.

And both of those times, Gentiles. People who were far off and not a part of the covenant. People who had little knowledge of what God has done and who he is.

Jesus even says to his disciples that they are, Oh ye of little faith. They're the ones that are closest to him. This woman who doesn't know very much.

She just knows a little, but she trusts deeply. She gets something that even the disciples don't yet get. Her great faith. One of the things is number one, she just simply trusted.

[23 : 48] She didn't have a lot of knowledge, but that didn't stop her. She's never seen Jesus do a miracle from all we would know. But she heard the testimony of others.

I've heard with my ears. And I believe. That's what faith does. Based on what she knew, she chose to believe.

She chose to trust. She chose to even hope and to persevere. Even with perceived obstacles and barriers. She trusted.

She hoped. She persevered. R.C. Sproul writes about this. And it's as if Jesus is speaking to her. And he says, You've trusted me when I did not answer you.

You've trusted me when I didn't include you. You've trusted me when I didn't exalt you. How great is your faith? She showed great humility.

[24 : 53] That's a part of faith. Even though she's unworthy. A historic enemy. She knew who Jesus was from what she'd heard. And she trusted in his character to do what she asked.

Tim Keller once said that it's not the strength of your faith, but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch.

She believed in Jesus. She trusted in his ability to come through for her. And she had the great humility to pursue and to trust.

And she was persistent. Here we see a picture that's like Jacob in Genesis chapter 18, where he's wrestling with the angel of the Lord and says, I'm not letting you go until you bless me.

Jesus is actually, maybe some commentators say, strengthening her faith by allowing her to wrestle with him. Oh Lord, son of David, have mercy on me.

[25 : 59] Silence. Then he says, I came only to the lost sheep of Israel. Lord, help me. It's not right to take bread from the children and throw it at the dogs.

Yet, Lord, even the dogs get to eat crumbs from the master's table. And he says, great is your faith. Like Jacob wrestling with the Lord, I will not let you go until you bless me.

That persistence understands what Paul said in Romans 8, 32, that he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

You didn't spare your own son. Why would you spare other things that I need, Lord? And it trusts and it persists. He took care of our greatest problem.

Will he not take care of everything that we need? What would Jesus say about our faith? And one question is, is there anything that you've been asking the Lord for for years?

[27 : 07] And you're tempted to stop. Many of us probably do. Where it's almost like, why am I even praying this? I've been praying the same thing over and over for years and years and years.

The woman persisted and he said, great is your faith. Do we trust him enough to keep going? Do we trust in his character to persevere, even when it seems that the Lord is silent?

Perseverance in prayer changes us. And that's a big part of it. But the Lord wants us to persist. In fact, he gives a parable in Luke 18 about persisting in prayer.

Samuel Rutherford, the great Scottish minister, said this. He said, fervor is a heavenly ingredient in prayer. An arrow drawn with full strength has a speedier issue.

In other words, persist wholeheartedly. Don't give up. It may seem that the Lord is silent, but we're not at the end of the story yet.

[28 : 17] When it seems like we can't hear from him, that he's not answering, we need to be asking the question, Lord, what are you up to? What do you want me to learn? I will come back tomorrow and I will pray again for this.

I will keep pursuing you. We don't have to make prayer about finding the proper words. We can't manipulate God to give us what we want.

But he tells us to approach him in desperation and persistence. And that will test our faith, but it will test us to make us strong, purified like gold.

Trust him. Keep crying out to him. Find your hope in him, knowing that even crumbs from his table is better than anything this world has to offer us.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that we have this story to instruct us, Lord, that we can learn from this woman who was desperate to see her daughter healed.

[29 : 30] And it might seem that she's pestering Jesus. She didn't care. And it honored him. He said, great is your faith.

May we learn from this. May we keep going, knowing that if it feels like you're silent, we're just not at the end of the story yet. That you have a plan that is better than what we could have ever come up with.

That all that you do is for our good and for your glory. Give us the faith to trust. Christ, this unlikely woman of great faith has a lot to teach us.

And may we persist in prayer as she did. Be as desperate in prayer as she was. And have the humility to say, I trust you with whatever you decide, Lord. Help us to grow in prayer.

Help us to grow in faith. And we pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.