

L E S S O N 9

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Faith of a Canaanite Woman

The family of five were enjoying their day at the beach. The children were playing in the ocean and making sandcastles when in the distance a little old lady appeared. Her gray hair was blowing in the wind, and her clothes were dirty and ragged. She muttered to herself as she picked up things from the beach and put them into a bag. The parents called the children to their side and told them to stay away from the lady. From what they had seen, the mother summarized the woman to her children with four words: "Do not trust her."

Weeks later, this family learned they had misinterpreted the woman. She was a retired teacher who picked up bits of glass, so children wouldn't cut their feet. As she picked up the broken glass, she faithfully prayed for the people who had dropped it, even though she didn't know them by name.

What would you think if you were told that on your tombstone would be inscribed a four-word epitaph? Who would you want to write it, friend or foe? If a newspaper critic wrote about a concert pianist, "He was a failure," we'd say, "That was only his opinion." But if a great musician called him a genius, we might take the remark more seriously.

Our Scripture describes a woman with four immortal words: "Great is your faith." We can trust these words about her as being true because the absolute expert on faith spoke them! For Jesus searched out bold faith in the same way a gem collector would search out jewels.

- 1.** *Do you ask God for impossible things? Why or why not?*
- 2.** *What's the biggest request you've ever prayed for? What happened?*
- 3.** *In what area of your life would you like to have more faith?*

LESSON FOCUS: Be bold in your requests to Jesus. Great faith brings God's blessings.

A Mother's Plea

Matthew 15:21-24, 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.

Matthew 15:21-24, NIV

²¹Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²A 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."

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

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

In the first half of Matthew 15, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees in Jerusalem for missing the point of the law they taught: heartfelt obedience to God based on faith. The region that Jesus travels to next—the region of Tyre and Sidon (vs. 21)—would have raised the eyebrows of many Jewish readers. Culturally speaking, this area was the opposite of the honorable Jerusalem. It was filled with Gentiles (non-Jews) who seemingly had no interest in the things of God. What was Jesus about to do there?

Suddenly, a local woman burst onto the scene. The passage calls her a "Canaanite," which means she was from a people group that was historically considered an enemy of God's people (vs. 22). Time and again in the Old Testament, the Canaanites' idol worship caused the Israelites to stray from the living God (Judg. 3:6; Ps. 106:34-36). Yet this woman spoke to Jesus in a manner very different from what might be expected of a "typical" Canaanite!

Firstly, she called Jesus "Lord" (vs. 22), which recognized His authority over the situation and her personally. Even more

amazingly, she called Him the “Son of David” (vs. 22), a title which showed belief that Jesus was the promised Savior of Israel—the Messiah—as prophesied in the Scriptures (Isa. 9:7; Jer. 33:15). Not even many Jewish people were sure that Jesus was the promised Messiah, yet somehow this Gentile woman had learned about these promises and believed in them with radical faith.

Like several other faith-filled people in the Gospels (Matt. 17:15, Mark. 5:23), this woman wasn’t asking for a miracle on her own behalf. Instead, she pleaded for Jesus to cure her daughter, who was suffering terribly from a demon (vs. 22).

Jesus’ first response to the woman may seem confusing: He chose not to answer her—not even with “a word” (vs. 23). While the text doesn’t explain exactly why He kept silent, His attitude would have been considered normal for the time period: Typically, men and women didn’t address each other if they were strangers. Further, observant Jewish people didn’t talk to Gentiles. That said, Jesus openly spoke to women and Gentiles at other times in Matthew’s Gospel, especially when they asked for healing (8:5-13; 9:22)! As scholar R.T. France notes, it’s possible Jesus sensed that this woman—more than most others—was ready to “rise to the challenge” of this situation and courageously pursue His mercy. Indeed, Jesus’ silence didn’t discourage the woman from boldly asking for help again and again. The disciples, annoyed by her shouting, begged Jesus to “send her away” (vs. 24).

Jesus responded with the familiar picture of a shepherd. Echoing passages from the Old Testament prophets, He said He was sent only to the “lost sheep of Israel” (vs. 25).

4. *What does the Canaanite woman call Jesus?*

5. *What is motivating the woman to cry out and pursue Jesus?*

6. *How does Jesus first react to the woman’s pleas? How do the disciples react?*

7. *To whom does Jesus say He was sent?*

Bread for the Faithful

Matthew 15:25-28, KJV

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.

Matthew 15:25-28, NIV

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

²⁶He 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."

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

Whether or not the woman heard Jesus' answer to His disciples, she did not turn away in discouragement. In fact, she decided that she would no longer simply shout from a distance but boldly approached the Lord herself! Yet rather than storming up to Jesus to make an angry demand, she came forward with reverence, kneeling in front of him. Her simple cry of "Lord, help me!" (vs. 25) once again recognized Jesus' special position of authority.

Finally, Jesus broke His silence—but only to refuse the woman's request. Once again, He used a word picture to point out the seeming "problem" of the woman's Gentile background. Comparing God's mercy to bread, He said it is not right to take the mercy that rightfully belongs to the "children" of Israel and throw it to the "dogs" (vs. 26).

His meaning would have been clear to everyone who was listening. In the first century, it was common for Jewish people to call Gentile outsiders "stray dogs" as a serious insult. Although Jesus used a different (and significantly less harsh) word than the slur people typically used, his meaning would have been clear. It is as if he is saying that His mercy was intended only for those of Jewish heritage—not for Gentiles like this woman.

Considering Jesus' previous kindness toward those who come to Him in faith—including at least one Gentile centurion (Matt. 8:5-13)—His response in verse 26 seems shocking. The text doesn't tell us about Jesus' tone of voice or His facial expression, so we cannot fully tell how He phrased these seemingly harsh words. Some scholars argue that Jesus might have taken the tone of a teacher, waiting for this woman's answer to make a key point to the listeners around them.

Whatever the case may be, the grieving mother seemed to understand and was ready with an answer of her own. Keeping with Jesus' image of dogs at dinner, she challenged the divide between dogs and children, cleverly responding that even dogs can eat the leftovers from their master's table. (vs. 27).

Such an answer would require a great deal of humility. Even if Jesus was only going to consider her a "dog," she indicated she would still acknowledge Him as the master of the table. It would also require great confidence in God's goodness. Her argument wasn't primarily based on what she felt she deserved, but about her confidence in what God can give. She had faith that Jesus is without limits and there will be enough "bread" of mercy for her, no matter what her background is.

As it turns out, the woman's words were absolutely right! After hearing her amazing statement, Jesus warmly commended her "great faith" (vs. 28). He showed no hesitation to give her exactly what she asked for—immediately! God's mercy was clearly for her, and for all who come to Jesus with courageous faith in Him. Her example will forever be a special example of persistence and bravery.

8. *What is this woman's attitude when she approaches Jesus?*

9. *What does Jesus mean when he talks about taking the children's bread and giving it to the dogs?*

10. *How does the woman respond to Jesus' statement? What do her words mean?*

11. *What is Jesus' final response to this woman?*

He Will Do It!

When my brother and I were growing up, we attended church and loved Jesus. I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a youth pastor. I've always felt a heart for teenagers and want them to know how much Jesus loves them. So I loved being in church, helping out and volunteering whenever possible. My brother went more out of obligation and only because it's what the family did on Sundays.

When my brother moved away to go to college, he started hanging out with people who liked to party and drink. The more he hung out with them, the more he started behaving like them. He quit attending church altogether. I knew this wasn't the right path for him, so I started praying that he would come back to the Lord. It was heartbreaking for me to watch someone I loved so much be leading this kind of lifestyle and not living up to his full potential. I knew it hurt my parents as well because they had raised him in the Lord, but he had stepped away on his own volition. I prayed for years as I listened to his stories of crazy exploits and drunken parties and shenanigans with his fraternity brothers.

After several months and years, I was overjoyed when my brother started coming to church with us once more. Slowly but surely, he built back his relationship with Jesus. Now he volunteers on Sundays with the rest of my family and is seeking God's will in all aspects of his life. It took a long time of praying, but eventually the fruit was born. Throughout the experience, my faith was strengthened because I knew that God would hear my prayer, and it would be answered according to His perfect timing. I never gave up on praying, and finally my brother returned to the Lord.

12. *What is a situation in your life in which you feel like you're at the end of your rope when it comes to prayer?*

13. *What Scripture references support persistence in your prayer life?*

14. *How can you encourage others to keep the faith when it feels impossible to do so?*

Pray Big

We tend to put God in a box. We think if we can't do something ourselves, then God must not be able to do it either. There's this subconscious idea that He is made in our image, instead of the other way around. The fact is God is so much bigger than we can even comprehend and no prayer request is too big or impossible for Him.

▶ *In the space below, consider what areas of your life need the biggest amount of prayer or miracle at the moment. Number them in order from greatest to least. Put this list somewhere you will see it each day and remember to pray big, even for the impossible. God is capable of all things!*

KEY VERSE

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. —Matthew 15:28, KJV

Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment. —Matthew 15:28, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

Week of April 29 through May 5

(See *The Quiet Hour* for devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Psalm 35:1-8, 22-28—Vindicate Me, O Lord My God.

Tues. Psalm 112—Blessed Are They Who Fear God.

Wed. Acts 3:12-26—Repent and Turn to God.

Thurs. John 3:1-8, 13-17—God So Loves the World.

Fri. Psalm 5—Lord, Lead Me in Your Righteousness.

Sat. 1 John 1:1—2:2—Christ Our Atoning Sacrifice.

Sun. Romans 3:21-30—Atonement by Christ's Blood.