

## “A Picture of True Faith”

Matthew 15:21-28

January 2, 2005

### Text Comment

Whether or not this is Matthew’s explicit purpose in juxtaposing the first two paragraphs of chapter 15, each in its own way prepares the way for the Gentile mission that would follow upon the Lord’s ascension. Living faith will not remain the province of Jews only and, to that end, the requirements of Jewish ceremonial law need not stand in the way of the evangelization of the Gentile nations. The priority of the spiritual state of the heart, emphasized in the first paragraph, is put to a practical test when a Gentile woman comes to Jesus with real faith and hope in him. [France, 246] In any case, the previous paragraph reveals the growing hostility of the Jews to Jesus while this paragraph describes a Gentile woman’s faith in him. It is thus a foretaste of things to come.

- v.21 As the Gospels make clear, Jesus did not conduct evangelistic missions in Gentile territory. He was sent, as we will hear him say in v. 24, to the lost sheep of Israel. As we pointed out at 8:7 there is no evidence in the Gospels that Jesus ever even so much as entered a Gentile home. So this withdrawal to the region of Tyre and Sidon, that is, north of Galilee, was for the purpose of rest and recuperation. It was far enough away that the Jewish crowds from Galilee couldn’t follow them. But, as often before, his plans for a retreat are thwarted by people’s knowledge that he had come into their area. Even the Gentiles had heard of his miraculous power to heal the sick.
- v.22 The fact that his Gentile woman addresses Jesus as the “Son of David” suggests some real understanding on her part. The fact that she pleads for *mercy* indicates that she knew she had no claim on Jesus’ attention. That humility on the part of this Gentile woman was precisely what was so often lacking among the Lord’s own people.
- v.23 It is striking that Jesus did not answer her. Usually he responded quickly to appeals for help and often offered help even before his help was asked for.

The disciples seem to mean that Jesus should give the woman what she wanted so that she would leave. In other uses of the verb here translated “send away” the dismissal comes after the desire has been satisfied (cf. Matt. 18:27; Luke 2:29). Further, the Lord’s reply to them in the next verse makes more sense if the disciples were, in fact, asking Jesus to do for the woman what she wanted.

- v.24 Remember, in 10:5-6, we read Jesus instructing his disciples before sending them out to preach and heal: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.” This was the Lord’s consistent strategy, however much in his teaching he anticipated the world-wide gospel mission that would follow the completion of his earthly ministry. That mission was for later. It was the Jews who occupied his attention during his ministry.

- v.25 “She came...” Apparently she had been calling to Jesus from a distance up to this point. Now she comes right up to him.
- v.27 The woman’s reply is perceptive, humble, and determined. If, as a Gentile she is a dog, then at least let her have the dog’s crumbs.

Matthew makes it clear that the purpose of this episode, so far as he recorded it in his Gospel, was to draw attention to the faith of this woman. He reports another of the Lord’s miraculous healings, but the report that the woman’s daughter was healed is almost an afterthought. The climax is found in the Lord’s remark to the woman, “You have great faith.” Clearly, the way he responded to her, not replying to her at first and then speaking so peremptorily to her, was designed to test her faith. Her faith met his test and it is to her faith that the Lord draws our attention. It is obviously important that this woman was a Gentile and not a Jew – that she is even called a Canaanite. This is the only use of that term in the New Testament, a term that was even then something of an old fashioned way of speaking. It has inevitable associations for a Bible reader with the pagan, wicked people the Jews displaced from the Promised Land. It is a name with overtones of the virulent ungodliness that Israel long before encountered in the Promised Land. Calling her a Canaanite, making her in that way as different from an Israelite as was possible, only makes his remark about this woman’s faith the more striking and memorable. [Hagner, ii, 441]

Indeed, this *Canaanite* woman is the only person in the Gospel who is commended for having *great* faith. Only two people are praised for their faith in this Gospel; the other is also a Gentile, the centurion of 8:10. But only of this woman does Jesus say that she had *great* faith. He had spoken of his disciples *little* faith as recently as 14:31 and will speak of their little faith again as soon as 16:8, but here he draws attention to this woman’s *great* faith. We have already made the point many times that in his Gospel Matthew makes a particular point of emphasizing the nature of true discipleship. He has a special interest in what it means to believe in Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount, which Matthew records in the greatest detail of any Gospel writer, is a sermon on the nature and the fruit of true and living faith and how it is distinguished from its imitations. And in the intervening material we have found attention being drawn again and again to this same subject.

So it is no surprise, really, that in Matthew we should be given another lesson about true faith. We know from the way in which this narrative is written that its lesson is a lesson about faith in Christ. This woman had great faith. So we are to ask ourselves: what made her faith great? In what did its greatness consist?

Well, the answer to that is found in the surprising response the Lord made to this woman when she came to him crying out for help. And that is very interesting and important to realize, for the Lord’s response is not only surprising to us, it is even troubling. One commentator describes the Lord’s reply to this woman as harsh, brutal, and offensive. He describes the Lord’s reply to her in v. 24 as “an atrocious saying,” expressing “incredible insolence” and “the worst kind of chauvinism.” George Bernard Shaw once wrote of the Lord’s treatment of this woman that this was a time when Jesus was not a Christian. Well *that* is preposterous. Jesus *was not* a Christian.

He makes people Christians! And, obviously, he was not only after something from this woman, but he got from her what he was after.

But, even more perceptive and sympathetic commentators fall over themselves trying to take the sting out of the Lord's silence in the first place and his peremptory reply in the second. A number of them, say such things as this:

“The tone and the look with which a thing is said make all the difference. Even a thing which seems hard can be said with a disarming smile. We can call a friend ‘an old villain’, or ‘a rascal’, with a smile and a tone which takes all the sting out of it and which fills it with affection. We can be quite sure that the smile on Jesus’ face and the compassion in his eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness.” [William Barclay in Morris, 405]

Another fine commentator, whose book I have used repeatedly in preparing these sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, says a similar thing:

“...written words cannot convey a twinkle in the eye, and it may be that Jesus was almost jocularly presenting her with the sort of language she might expect from a Jew in order to see how she would react.” [France, 247]

But this is surely a serious mistake. The whole power of this episode and its important lesson about faith is derived precisely from the fact that the Lord rebuffed this woman, and did so in what could seem to be a cruel way. There is no way to sugar-coat the Lord's reply in v. 26: “It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.” The Lord, after all, is responding to a desperate mother's plea for the life of her daughter. She is afraid and heart-broken and comes to Jesus thinking that she will be shown mercy and he replies by saying that he can't be bothered speaking to a dog?! To be sure, we cannot know precisely in what tone of voice the Lord uttered that remark, but had Matthew wanted us to know that the Lord pulled his punch in some way – with a joking tone of voice or a twinkle in his eye – he certainly could have and would have made that clear. The text must stand on its own as the Lord's response and clearly it is dismissive of this woman and intentionally so. It is a strong statement. There is a harsh character to it. “Dog” was a current Jewish term of abuse for Gentiles. [France, 247] And this woman, who knew to call Jesus the Son of David knew all too well what Jews thought about Gentiles. Here is Jesus confirming all she knew.

I think the last thing we should think is that Jesus made that remark with a smile or a chuckle and thereby took the sting out of it. The woman's reply in v.27, as the reply of a woman of great faith, seems clearly to contradict that interpretation of the Lord's remark. She *was* being rebuffed and peremptorily. What is more, it was a harsh thing to say about Gentiles in general and about this Gentile in particular. She was not a child but a dog. Her faith is great *precisely because* she replied to such a stern rebuff as she did; not being put off by it, but continuing to press the Lord for the help she knew he alone could supply.

One of the great works of Reformed spirituality was written as a series of sermons on this paragraph. It is Samuel Rutherford's *The Trial and Triumph of Faith*. And in that perceptive title, Rutherford reminds us of the true nature of this episode: the Lord Jesus *tried* this woman's faith and she triumphed by faith in this trial. There would be no trial if we took the sting out of the Lord's non-reply in the first place, his apparent indifference to this woman's need; and out of his hard words when he did reply. What is perfectly clear as the narrative proceeds is that, by speaking this way, the Lord was testing this woman and discovering the strength of her faith. And there would be no triumph if the woman's faith had not persevered in the face of the Lord's apparent rebuff.

Think of what stood in this woman's way. She was a Gentile going to a Jew for help. Today, in a mostly Gentile church, we find it hard to appreciate how unlikely that was. It would be something like a white middle class man in the South, in the days of Jim Crow, going cap in hand to a black man to ask him for help only he could provide. Then, the woman *cries out* to the Lord. We get the impression that there are other people there, that she has to make herself heard above the sound of others. She has to stand at a distance and forget herself and start yelling at the Lord for help. And he pays no attention to her. She was, in all likelihood, at some point intercepted by the disciples and, clearly, they showed no real sympathy for this woman or her plight. They wanted to get rid of her. She was an interruption. She was ruining their plans for a quiet getaway. But she pressed through until she was on her knees before the Lord pleading with him for mercy for her daughter. And, then, when she finally had his full attention, he calls her a dog and says he has better things to do with his time; that other people are more important to him than she is.

Nothing that has happened to this woman since she came into sight of Jesus has gone well; nothing has given her reason to think that Jesus actually would help her. But she keeps looking to him and crying to him and, even when rebuffed in such hard language, she comes right back and, in effect, offers him still another chance to tell her that she and her problem are unimportant to him. *That is great faith* Jesus himself tells us. *That* is the kind of faith he wants all of his disciples to have.

When commentators talk about Jesus speaking to this woman with a smile or saying what he said in vv. 24 and 26 with a chuckle they are forgetting what the Christian life is really like and how God so often seems to his children and the Lord so often seems to his disciples.

I read a very sad story a while back. A story about a great evil that is done in our society. It concerns a Christian woman (I suppose there are many Christian women like this in America's cities) who lived in inner city Baltimore. People spoke of her as a joyful Christian, always ready to speak of her faith in Christ. Her husband ran afoul of the law and was sentenced to prison. This woman waited for him, raising her children by working at menial jobs for small pay, and keeping the house ready for the day on which he would come home. She took the children to the prison to visit their father as often as she could, preparing them for the day when he would finally come home. She waited and prayed for that day and it finally came.

During his stay in prison however, as too often happens, separated so long from a woman, this man engaged in sex with other men and, in so doing, he contracted AIDS. He had a faithful wife at home, a better wife than most of his fellow prisoners had. Most of them who were married when they went to prison had long since been divorced by their wives. But this woman had not divorced her husband, she had loved him through thick and thin and prayed for his release.

Do you know that such is our culture's worship of sex, and now of homosexual sex, that it is strictly illegal to reveal to anyone that a person has AIDS. The medical providers in that prison knew that her husband had AIDS when he left the prison to go home. But no one would tell her that her husband was coming home with AIDS. No one told her what her husband had done in prison or what had happened to him as a consequence. His "right" to special confidentiality, society's unwillingness in any way to confine his sexual pleasure, meant that by returning to his faithful Christian wife, he murdered her. She was a poor woman; she could not afford the fancy drug cocktails that lengthen the life of AIDS patients today. She was infected and she died. He died too, but he shouldn't have been allowed to kill her and leave his children without a mother, without parents at all. But that is precisely what he did and what our government abetted him in doing. [Robert Hart, "Death by Legal Injunction," *Touchstone* (November 2004) 20-21]

But now I want you to think of this episode from the viewpoint of the Lord's encounter with this Canaanite woman. This faithful wife and mother, who so long and so often came to Jesus for her husband and his soul, discovers that she now, in answer to all those prayers and as a reward for all her faithfulness to the Lord, she has AIDS from the very man whom she sought the Lord's help for time and time again. What is the difference between *that* and Jesus refusing to answer this woman at all in the first place. And what is the difference between *that* and the Lord telling this Canaanite woman, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs"? Does it not *seem* that the Lord dealt callously with this faithful wife and mother? Does it not *seem* that he was terribly hard with her?

Is it not often the teaching of the Bible, is it not often the confession of the psalmists, and has it not been the experience and the anguished admission of Christians in the ages since, that Christ often seems to refuse any answer – he seems indifferent to their cries – and that, when he does answer, he often seems to be hard, unfeeling, uncaring of them? Is this not the mystery of faith that the Bible is preparing us to face time and time again? It is not the message of entire books of the Bible, books such as Job and Ecclesiastes, that believing people will *not* be able to tell that the Lord is forgiving them, and will *not* be able to see how he is keeping his promises to them or providing for them or answering their prayers. And is not the lesson of that, taught here in Matthew 15 and in so many other places in the Bible, that true and living faith must surmount these contrary appearances. True faith must believe the Word of God sometimes in defiance of appearances. True faith must keep coming to Christ in the sure and certain hope of his love no matter that he seems at times not to have any care for you at all.

The unbeliever says, give it up as a bad job. It obviously does not work. You trusted the Lord Jesus for what you needed and got nothing in return. It is time you accepted the fact that there is nothing here, nothing real. But through the ages faith, true and living faith has said instead, "Yet, though he slay me, I will trust in him" and "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord." That is what this woman in Baltimore did. Her husband died

before she did and through the months of her dying people saw nothing so clearly as her love for Christ and her joy in his salvation.

That is what faith is and that is what faith does. If we always got what we wanted from the Lord when we asked for it, it would not be faith; it would be sight. It is precisely because we *must* believe, precisely because we *cannot* see, cannot predict the Lord's promise, that it is a life of faith. And, whatever else we say, the Bible has certainly prepared us for this. It has told us that the Lord would often seem to be ignoring our pleas; it has told us that he would often appear to be dealing harshly with us. And it has told us that hidden in the Lord's "No" is always his "yes." And the unassailable proof of *that* is the cross; the ultimate demonstration of Christ's love for us is that he gave himself to suffering and death for us, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God.

Samuel Rutherford perceptively wrote: "It is said he answered her not a word; but it is not said, he heard not one word: these two differ much. ... his not answering is an answer, and speaks thus, 'Pray on, go on, and cry; for the Lord holdeth his door fast bolted, not to keep out, but that you may knock and knock.'" [*The Trial and Triumph of Faith*, 115] Fact is, Christ is after faith in us and an ever stronger faith, because "faith is the victory that overcomes the world." And so, he is always testing our faith; always making it *hard* to believe so that our faith may grow stronger through its being exercised. Faith, like a muscle, grows stronger as the weight it must bear grows heavier. Faith grows by believing in the teeth of difficulty, by believing what is hard to believe. When faith is rewarded after continuing to besiege a silent heaven, or, worse, when heaven seems uncaring and hard, then a great lesson has been learned and that believer is never the same. It is a frequent theme of the Bible's teaching that God tests his children's faith and strengthens it by that testing. He also manifests it to the world and the unseen world.

What is it, after all, that most proves the power of faith and the glory of faith in Jesus Christ? It is that one believes *in defiance of appearances*. Do you remember what C.S. Lewis has Screwtape, the senior Devil, say to Wormwood, the apprentice devil?

"Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

Why? Because it is not weak faith, little faith that so believes in spite of appearances; it is strong faith. And the devil can do nothing to strong and great faith!

What the Lord showed us, by his apparently unkind response to this dear woman was what it means to believe in him and how one must do so. It is a lesson for every believer, for every Christian disciple. And then it is followed by another lesson. Although it took a persistent faith on her part, we cannot forget that the woman got precisely what she hoped for and had asked for in the end. Her faith was tried, but it triumphed, to her own great joy and the healing of her daughter. The Lord may have tested her, but he did bless her in the end. He wanted her to demonstrate to his followers ever after her great faith – that is why he responded to her as he did – so that through the ages, believers would see this woman and want to be and be inspired to be

*just like her.* For, strange as it may seem, this episode is not the description of rare and unusual circumstances in a Christian's life, but of his or her everyday life.

That is why a perceptive reader of the Bible, such as Alexander Moody Stuart, can write,

“The whole narrow way is a series of mountains that rise up continually before you in your path, and that are levelled continually to faith in Jesus Christ.” [*Memoir*, 253]

And that leads him to say further,

“Men often speak of faith as if it were the easiest thing in the world: of all things in the world it is the most difficult. It is impossible to man; it is the gift of God.” [254]

But God promises to bless such faith and the greater it is the greater the blessing that will come to it. That also is the witness of the Christian ages. For the Lord ignores and then speaks in hard words for a time, but then he grants his blessing.

If I find him, if I follow, what his guerdon here?  
(A guerdon is a reward, a recompense.)  
Many a sorrow, many a labor, many a tear.

If I still hold closely to him, what has he at last?  
Sorrow vanquished, labor ended, Jordan passed.

Finding, foll'wing, keeping, struggling, is he sure to bless?  
Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs, answer “Yes.”

Or, simply imagine this good woman, this Canaanite woman with so great a faith that she triumphed when Jesus tested her, the next time she came to Jesus for help. Not physically to him – for she probably never saw him again – but spiritually in her prayers. Did she ever imagine, could she ever have imagined, that he had not heard her and did not intend to reward her faith? No. She knew, as we know, that however he must test our faith, he loves our faith and must and will reward it.

Now, all of us are to *believe* in the Lord in the assurance of that fact. Put your faith to work and, when it is tested, be glad that in this way it becomes stronger still.