

THE FAITH OF A GENTILE WOMAN

Mark 7:24-30

Key Verse: 7:29

Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

In today's passage, Jesus admires a woman's humble faith. The woman teaches us what it means to be humble before God. She also teaches us what it means to have faith in Jesus. This woman was admired by our Lord Jesus for her faith. Let us learn what kind of faith she had. May God help us to be men and women of faith in this generation!

I. THE FAITH OF A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN (24-29)

Look at verse 24. *"Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret."* After teaching his disciples and the Pharisees why they should have clean hearts more than clean hands, Jesus left Gennesaret and went to the vicinity of Tyre, into a Gentile territory. Tyre was an ancient Phoenician seaport city. It was located on the Mediterranean coast in the area that is today southern Lebanon, just north of the border with Israel. (Its modern name is Sur.) Jesus wanted to have a quiet time there with his disciples. Once again, however, his plan of a quiet retreat did not work out because he could not keep his presence secret. Even in this Gentile territory, the gospel of Jesus was spreading widely.

What did Jesus do for the people in the region? One particular person drew Jesus' attention. Who was this person? Look at verses 25-26. *"In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter."* A woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came to Jesus and pleaded with him for his mercy. She was a Gentile woman. She was a woman of faith. There are several things we can learn from her.

First, she came to Jesus by faith. This woman had many reasons not to go public with her daughter's problem. Typically, a mother regards her daughter as the most beautiful person in the world, even when her daughter is plain-looking. So to this woman, her little daughter must have been a source of her joy and pride. But one day, her daughter said, "Mom, I have a terrible headache." Soon her behavior began to change. She used to be so bright and perky. Her mother called her "my little sunshine." But now she was moody and gloomy all the time. Her blonde hair used to be so pretty and bouncy. But now her hair was unkempt and matted. There was no smile on her face—only empty stares. She used to have many friends, but no one was around her any more. She used to be invited to many birthday parties. But now her friends avoided her, calling her a mental case. Actually she was possessed by an evil spirit. The little girl's

face was disfigured by the demon's torture. The evil spirit made her to foam on the mouth and crawl on the ground. It made her screech in the middle of the night. She would cut her wrist with a sharp object. Her mother must have felt like dying when she saw her precious daughter become a hideous creature. The little girl's scream made the mother's heart ache. The mother must have felt helpless and was in a deep despair.

But a hope was born when this mother heard about what the good shepherd Jesus was doing in Galilee. Then one day, she heard that Jesus was in her own town. As soon as she heard the news, she came to Jesus and fell at his feet. However, there were many obstacles that made her coming to Jesus very difficult. What were some of the hindrances that she had to overcome? First of all, the mother must have tried to keep her daughter's problem a secret as much as she could. By nature, a mother wants to cover her daughter's weaknesses and bring out only the bright side. But this woman overcame what other people would say about her daughter and came to Jesus by faith. Her coming to Jesus was an expression of her faith in Jesus and her shepherd's heart for her little daughter.

The author Mark comments in verse 26 that this woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. In other words, she was a Gentile woman. This was another obstacle she had to overcome. At that time, the Jews and the Gentiles did not associate with each



other. The Jews despised the Gentiles as unclean "pigs." The people in the region of Tyre, however, had their own racial pride. They had impressive cultural history dating back to 10th century B.C. The splendor of Phoenician Tyre was the envy of many conquerors including the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great. In 332 B.C. Alexander the Great conquered the city and since then the people were exposed to the sophistication of Greek culture. The cities of Tyre and Sidon were also proud, historic centers of Canaanite paganism, with tombs of ancient kings and temples to Heracles, Astarte and various other gods. The people in the region also had a strong feeling against the Jews. The racial prejudice must have been a difficult factor in her decision to come to Jesus. But by faith, she came to Jesus and begged him to drive the evil spirit out of her daughter.

Her coming to Jesus, overcoming her emotional feelings and racial prejudice, was a great victory. We must learn that no emotional, cultural, racial matters should hinder our coming to Jesus.

Second, she had a humble faith (27-28). Look at verse 27. As soon as Jesus saw her kneeling down at his feet, he had something very unusual to say to her. What did Jesus say to the woman? "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." Wow! Jesus called the Jews God's children and the Gentiles dogs! He implied that the woman was a Gentile dog and did not deserve to get the blessings reserved for the Jews. These days a dog is known as man's best friend to many people. Some dogs are pampered like a prince or princess.

But in those days, a dog was a symbol of disgrace. For example, when the boy David challenged the giant Goliath with only a sling shot and pebbles, do you know what Goliath said to him? He said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?” (1Sa 17:43) The Jews especially despised the Gentiles referring to them as dogs. When a Jew said, “You dog,” it meant a Gentile was an unclean animal, not even worthy to be called a person.

Why did Jesus use such harsh language to this woman? Did Jesus have a gender bias? Was Jesus insensitive to women? Certainly not! On the contrary, there are many examples in the Bible that show how well Jesus understood women. There was a Samaritan woman who was lonely and thirsty. She was broken again and again by selfish men and her heart was closed very tight. But Jesus really understood her and wanted to help her. He humbly approached her with the question, “Will you give me a drink?” (Jn 4:7) Then Jesus offered her the living water welling up to eternal life. We also remember how Jesus comforted a widow whose only son had died. When Jesus met her in her son’s funeral procession, Jesus understood her deep sorrow. His heart went out to her. He raised her son from the dead by saying, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” (Lk 7:11-17) How about his love for Mary and Martha? These sisters had lost their only brother, Lazarus. Jesus arrived in their house several days after Lazarus died so that he could plant resurrection faith in their hearts. He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (Jn 11:25-26) After raising Lazarus from his tomb, Jesus said to the sisters, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (Jn 11:40) This way, Jesus helped the sorrowful sisters to have the glorious resurrection hope.

So why did this gentle Jesus speak to the woman harshly? Was it because she was a Gentile woman? Was Jesus a racist? No! Jesus is the Savior for both Jews and Gentiles. He broke down racial barriers when he went through Samaria in John 4 when all other Jews avoided the area. After all, Jesus traveled to the region of Tyre in this passage. Then why did Jesus speak harshly to this woman? It was because Jesus wanted to plant personal faith in her heart. Jesus wanted to test if she had faith in him. Healing the little girl was no problem with Jesus. But he wanted to establish a personal relationship with this woman based on her trust and faith. It was important for the woman to have personal faith in Jesus.

What was the woman’s response to Jesus’ words, “... it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs”? As we know well, women are very sensitive to what they hear. Many women like to hear compliments such as “Oh, you look lovely in that dress.” Women are especially sensitive to any insulting words. This woman could have been really furious about Jesus’ calling her a dog. But this woman was different. Look at verse 28. “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” This was a truly remarkable reply. Overcoming her pride, she admitted that she was a dog. She said, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She was a woman of humble faith before God. How can a person be humble like this before the Lord? Only when a person discovers himself an unworthy sinner before God, he can be truly humble like this woman. She called Jesus “Lord.”

Jesus was not some magician or exorcist. She was her Lord! So in effect, she confessed that only Jesus could save her from her sins. She also replied that even the crumbs of Jesus' blessings would be sufficient to heal her little daughter. She had great faith in Jesus. In short, she was a woman of humble faith. She was worthy to receive the Messiah's mercy.

James 4:6 says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Isaiah 66:2b says, "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." This woman deserved the Messiah's mercy when she humbled herself, admitting that she was a "dog" before the Messiah, and begging the mercy of God for her daughter.

Many people received God's mercy because of their humble faith. Naaman was a commander of the army of the king of Aram. When he had the disease of leprosy, he came to Elisha the prophet to receive a healing. But the country prophet did not even come out to see the general, but sent his servant to tell him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan" (2Ki 5:10). Humanly speaking, it was an insult to Naaman, because Elisha's prescription implied that he was dirty and had to be washed many times. But Naaman humbled himself and went to the Jordan River, washed, and was cleansed of his leprosy. He received God's mercy because he overcame his pride and humbly obeyed God's servant.

There were also women in the Bible who received God's blessings because of their humble faith. Let's think about Sarah, the wife of Abraham. God called Abraham to start a new life of faith when he was 75 years old (Ge 12). So Abraham said to his wife, "Sarah dear, we are going to leave our hometown. We are going to leave our relatives. We will also have to leave your friends and go where God wants us to go. Only that I don't know where that is." Sarah did not rebuke her husband for taking a very risky adventure in his old age. She did not complain. She did not say anything and just followed him on their long journey to the promised land. Some people who study the book of Genesis may think that Abraham was a vague character. But Sarah always liked Abraham. She humbly followed God's directions with her husband and they were blessed abundantly.

Third, she was a woman of prayer (28). Look at verse 28 again. *"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* This woman knew that she did not deserve the Messiah's mercy. But she did not give up. She did not say to Jesus, "You call me a dog. How can the Messiah say that to me?" Instead, she earnestly pleaded with him for his mercy. She said, "... but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." These were the words of wisdom given to her by God. First of all, she acknowledged that she was a dog. "Yes, Lord, but event the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She admitted that she did not deserve the grace of God. Her attitude toward God is very different from some people today who act and say as though God owes them some favor just because they go to church on Sundays. But this woman knew she was a sinner before God. She knew that she couldn't claim anything from God based on her own merit. So she just pleaded the mercy of God. She said, "...but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She did not beg the Messiah's mercy for the sake of begging; it was her earnest prayer. We must learn this kind of prayer for our

daughters. Her prayer came from her heart. We learn that women are most beautiful when they pray to God humbly like this Gentile woman. We also learn that women can say words of wisdom when they have humble faith in Jesus and a shepherd's heart for their daughters.

II. JESUS ADMIRES HER FAITH (29-30)

Jesus was deeply touched by her humble faith and prayer. Look at verse 29. *Then he told her, "For such as reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."* Jesus said, "for such a reply." Jesus acknowledged how wise her answer was. It came from the mouth and heart of a woman of faith. The Messiah's heart was deeply moved by her humble faith, humble prayer, and her shepherd's heart for the little daughter. Matthew says that Jesus admired her faith, saying, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (Mt 15:28).

Jesus knew that his remarks about the children's bread and tossing it to dogs were harsh to the woman. So when he heard her answer, he was very happy. He knew her answer came from her deep trust in him. So he said, "for such a reply." Jesus knew that she deeply trusted in him no matter what. Her reply reminds us of Daniel's three friends in the Book of Daniel. When they refused to worship the golden image of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, the king threatened to throw them into a blazing furnace. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Da 3:16-18). Daniel's friends trusted in God no matter what. They believed in the love of God that is unconditional.

The woman in today's passage had deep trust and faith in Jesus. Because of her faith, Jesus was happy to free her daughter from the demon possession. He said to her, *"For such as reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."* Look at verse 30. *"She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."* Because of her faith, she got her beautiful daughter back. With her humble faith, she claimed the bread of heaven which the Jews had rejected and thrown away. More importantly, because of her humble faith, she was able to meet personally the Lord Jesus. She accepted him as her personal Savior. She became a living proof that the door of salvation was opened to the Gentile world.

Today we learned how beautiful a woman's humble faith is. When the Gentile woman came to Jesus by faith, overcoming her pride and prejudice, Jesus healed her little daughter. Jesus also admired her humble faith. Let us pray that God may raise up many spiritual mothers like this among us. Many young people today need healing from God. May we have the humble faith like this woman so that we can bring them to Christ!