

**Mark:
Eating with the Dogs**

Mark 7:24-30

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Now turn with me to the Gospel of Mark, and we're in chapter seven. The Gospel of Mark, and chapter seven, and we pick up the reading this evening at verse twenty-four, and reading down to verse thirty.

Before we read the passage together, let's come before God in prayer.

Father, again we bow in Your presence. We thank You for this time of prayer and supplication and the assurance that our risen High Priest, our Savior Jesus Christ, cleanses and purifies all of our prayers as they are presented before You. Now bless the reading of Your word to us. Hide it within our hearts that we might not sin against You, and hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Mark 7:24-30

And from there He arose and went away to the region of Tyre. And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice. But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit, immediately came and fell at His feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of the Syrophenician race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And He was saying to her, "Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs!" And He said to her, "Because of this answer go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having departed.

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now, this is an extraordinary story. Jesus, in the region of Tyre—northwest, a good journey away from where He had been ministering in Galatia—and in the parallel passage in

Matthew 15, Matthew fills in a few details with regard to this incident that Mark does not. Matthew tells us that this is a story about great faith. Jesus says to this woman, "Great is your faith."

And I wonder, before we begin to look at this story together, is this something that you want? Is that one of your chief desires this evening, that you would have great faith? Not a faith that wavers; not a small faith; not a timid faith—but great faith. I wonder how much you desire that this evening.

Now there are two things that are distinctive about this story. Before we look at it in detail, there are two issues that we need to explore together.

The first is that Jesus is in Gentile territory. He's no longer in Galilee where He has been for the last number of chapters. He has gone northwest to the coast, Mediterranean coast—Gentile territory, the region of Tyre and Sidon. And this marks now the end of Jesus' fairly lengthy Galilean ministry.

And the story is going to be all the more remarkable because it isn't one of the covenant people of God that is going to demonstrate this extraordinary great faith; not someone to whom has been given the promises, the covenants, the law; but to a Gentile. A Gentile.

And a second feature that makes this story so remarkable is that it's a woman. Yes, a woman. And to Jewish readers, when this narrative first came to light, it would have been extraordinary that Jesus chose to demonstrate great faith in the profession not just of a Gentile, but of a Gentile woman. And the story seems to be exacerbating the point by telling us that this woman is concerned not about her son but about her daughter. One of the tremendous things that Jesus did in the course of His ministry was to elevate the importance and the social and religious status of women in the first century. No matter what we may think with regard to what the rest of the New Testament teaches about the biblical role and distinctive roles of men and women, the sheer fact is that Jesus in contrast to the rabbis of His day elevated the social and religious importance and status of women. This is a story about a woman of extraordinary faith, of great faith.

Now, this story tells us how Jesus brings out this great faith, teases it out, as it were, from this woman. And I want us to see a few things.

I. Jesus makes it difficult for the woman.

And the first thing I want us to see is this: that Jesus makes it very difficult for this woman. He makes it very difficult for this woman. Mark doesn't tell us this, but we need to pick the story up from Matthew, in Matthew 15:21-28. And Matthew says that this woman comes to Jesus, falls at His feet; she's in tears, she's crying, she's begging Him to help her with her daughter who is possessed of a demon.

And Matthew tells us in verse 23, in the parallel account of this story, that Jesus said to her not a word. He ignored her. He ignored her pleas, her cries. It's extraordinary. Maybe you've been accused of doing this—I know that I've been accused of doing this, when my head's been in the clouds and somebody has, you know, said something; and I've been accused of ignoring them, and they've taken umbrage and so on...and you've got to go back and undo a whole lot of difficulties, and sometimes it can be an extraordinary situation that can develop out of a context just like this. We won't dwell on that now, because Mark doesn't actually tell us this, but we need to know that background. He ignored her. He ignored her for a reason. He ignored her, as we shall see, in order to bring out her faith, but the sheer fact is that He made it difficult for her.

The silence of God: isn't that one of the things that we often wrestle with? Isn't that what Job often wrestles with in the great narrative of the story of Job? The silence of God: it can produce all kinds of reactions with us—anger and frustration, and disappointment and embarrassment.

There's that story, isn't there, of Martin Luther as he's leaving one morning and he's discouraged and cast down and forlorn, and his wife says to him, you know, "What's wrong?" (Katie, his wife...) and he says to her, "I think God is dead." And when he comes back that evening he finds the house is ...curtains are drawn, everything is black, Katie is going around from head to toe in black. And he says to her, "Katie, who died?" And she says, "Well, you said God had died!" There's a wife for you!

There's another feature of this story that Mark actually doesn't tell us, and that is the reaction of the apostles. When this woman came to Jesus, the apostles apparently said to Jesus, "Send her away. Send her away." Now again, we won't dwell on that, because Mark doesn't tell us that, but it's part of the background to the story. Jesus makes it difficult for this woman to come to Him.

Now what is it that Mark particularly dwells on? Well, she came to Jesus even though you and I might perceive that He had spoken about a doctrine of privilege. He talks about—this is what he says to her—that it is not right to take the children's bread and to give it to the dogs. Now, he talks about the children's bread: that is to say, the bread that belongs to the people of God, the bread that by right belongs to those who are the covenant people of God, the people of Israel, the Jews. And she is not a Jew. She's a Gentile. Here's Jesus raising a barrier. He's raising an obstacle for this woman, that there's such a thing as children's bread that she is not entitled to. It's distancing her. The remarkable thing about this woman's faith and the energy of this woman's faith is that it persevered despite the fact that Jesus is making it difficult for her to come, and He's underlining the fact that God had appeared and given promises and made covenants with His people, and she is outside of that. And He's saying that it's not right to take the children's bread and to give it to the dogs. And she perseveres, despite what seems to be a doctrine of privilege.

It's like as though Jesus had said to her—in a different context, you understand—but it's like as though here's a woman who is coming to Jesus wanting to believe and trust in Jesus, and He had raised the issue of election and predestination. It's that kind of thing that's before us here. There's an obstacle, there's a barrier. There's children's bread, and she's not entitled to it.

And in addition to that, there's this use of the word “dog.” It's not right, He says, to take the children's bread and to give it, to throw it, to the dogs. Now you can do all of the fine exegesis that you want to do on that statement. It's never going to come out pretty. You can explain all kinds of contexts and nuances, and you can say that the word that Jesus employs here doesn't refer to the scavengers that prowled the city streets and carried all kinds of diseases and so on and so forth; that this is a softer word, and that this is a Greek word that may apply to the custom that was just about beginning to occur in Jesus' day, to pet dogs, and that this word is not referring, you know, to the scavengers that are prowling out there that you're terrified of, but that this is a word that applies to household pets.

Well, that may be true. But you know, if you refer to a woman and call her by the name of a household pet, you're still not going to make any great favors! And however you interpret this, this is a harsh statement. This is a difficult statement. Jesus is saying it's not right to take the children's bread and to cast it to the dogs. It's extraordinary, isn't it, that Jesus is making it hard for this woman? He's putting up obstacles, barriers in the way of this woman coming to Jesus. He's underlining how unworthy she is. She has no entitlement, because she's outside of the covenant people of God and she's a Gentile. And Gentiles, as far as Jews were concerned, were dogs. Unclean. Unfit. You don't have any social contact with them, or you try and avoid that as much as possible. Or if you must do so, there's a ritual of cleansing that you have to go through. She's a sinner, and a member of a community to which God has given no promise.

What is Jesus doing? He's bringing her to the end of herself so that the only thing that she can plead is mercy. She can't plead entitlement, she can only plead mercy. He makes it difficult for her to come.

II. The woman makes it difficult for Jesus.

But secondly, she makes it difficult for Jesus, and that's the extraordinary thing, too. She makes it difficult for Jesus. I put it that way, because it seems to me that's exactly what she's doing. Her response is quite overwhelming. She doesn't say like Abner says in II Samuel, “Am I a dog?” and walks away. She says, “Truth, Lord. And yet...” She goes on. She agrees with the assessment. She doesn't fly off the handle and get all bent out of shape by this remark that Jesus makes. She catches Jesus in His own words. She employs a wonderful example of *argumentum ad hominem*. All you lawyers know all about that. Luther says she

ensnares Him in His own words. If I am a dog, she says, give me the dog's portion. Just give me the leftovers. Give me crumbs, crumbs that fall from the master's table. Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that an extraordinary thing for this woman to say? She agrees with the assessment entirely, and she says, 'Right. If I am a dog, just give me the crumbs that fall from the master's table.' It's a beautiful expression of the simplicity of her faith. This woman is a New Testament Jacob. It's as though she's taking hold of Jesus and she's saying 'I will not let You go until You bless me.' She's arguing with Jesus.

You know, there's a statement somewhere—I believe it's Cyril of Alexandria who says it—and he's saying it about the parable that Jesus tells of the importunate widow who comes to the judge at midnight and knocks on the door, and won't stop knocking on the door until the judge answers. And Cyril says “there is a sense in which in prayer that we should pray in such a way so as to make God ashamed if He does not grant our request.” To pray in such a way as to make Him ashamed if He doesn't grant our request...that's exactly what this woman is doing.

She could have done a number of things. She could have wallowed in self-pity at the fact that she was barely noticed, and ignored; and that the disciples wanted to send her away, and that Jesus didn't say a word to her.

She could have become angry and thrown a wobbly. She could have begun to cry, and uncontrollably sob. She could have done a number of things. But instead, she believed.

She took God at His word. She took Jesus at His word. She latches onto this word “dog.” It's as though she's put her foot in the door. It's like an unwanted salesman who comes knocking at your door, or somebody canvassing for the wrong political party! And they're at your door, and you want to close the door, but they put their foot in the door. And that's what she's doing. That's what we are to do, you and I, in prayer. We take the words of Jesus and we, as it were, take them back to Him.

You know, the Puritans—Matthew Henry, for example, in *Method for Prayer*; William Gurnall, when he's expounding that verse “praying with all prayer and all supplication in the Spirit”—that's exactly what we should be doing in prayer: taking God's word and taking that word and taking it back to God; praying God's word back to Him.

And that's what we see this woman doing. That's the measure of the greatness of her faith. She takes Jesus' word, and she takes it back to Him. You see the greatness of her faith. It has knowledge; she calls Him “Lord.” It assents to the voracity of what He's saying. She's saying, “Yes, Lord, that's true,” she says.

And this trust here, she falls down at Jesus' feet. You know, I don't know how

much she knew about Jesus, whether she'd ever seen Jesus before, whether she'd ever seen any miracles before—probably not. Away up in Tyre, all that she had heard was probably rumor—bits and pieces of information that had been passed to her by oral tradition. She knows very little about Jesus, and yet she trusts Him. She didn't have a fraction of the benefits that you and I have tonight, and yet her reliance is completely and utterly in Jesus. She will not let Him go until He blesses her.

III. How does Jesus respond?

Now let's ask in closing, what is it that Jesus did in response to her faith? And Jesus commends her. Matthew says He says about her that she had "great faith." She had great faith. She had great faith. Now what does Jesus give her? Crumbs? Crumbs that fall from the master's table? Is that what Jesus gives her? No. He gives her a hot, steaming loaf of bread. Her daughter, for whom she had come in the first place, is immediately healed and restored in response to her faith.

Now, does this have something to say to you and to me tonight about persisting in prayer, even when there are obstacles, even when there are difficulties, even when it seems as though Jesus is shutting the door in our face? Then stick your foot in the door. Stick your foot in the door. Maybe you come tonight, just as this woman came, with another on your heart. You're not coming about yourself, you're coming about another. And you know, that must have been all the more difficult. You know, it's one thing for people to say something and to be negative towards us; it's quite another thing to say something about our children, isn't it? And we can react in a wholly different way when it's our children that are at stake. And here is this woman; she's concerned about her daughter.

And maybe that's how you've come tonight, and you're burdened about a son; you're burdened about a daughter; you're burdened about a mother, a father, a brother, a sister. And it looks as though God isn't listening to you. It looks as though God is ignoring your prayers. It looks as though the heavens are echoing with the sound of your prayers, but nothing is happening. Then do what this woman did, because she's put here as an example for you and for me of persistence in prayer, of not letting Jesus go until He blesses us.

I ask you tonight, do you know anything about this kind of determination? Ah, many of us know what it is to give up. Many of us know what it is to wallow in self-pity. Many of us know what it is to give in to ourselves and to our circumstances. And I'm saying, let this woman be, as it were, a beacon that shines in a dark place that says to you and says to me, keep on praying. Keep on praying. Keep on bringing this petition, this laudable petition; this petition that isn't about yourself, it's about another, and it's for a good and noble and righteous cause. It may be for the salvation of a loved one. Well, don't stop praying. Never,

never give up.

James Fraser, one of the great Covenanters of the seventeenth century, once wrote, "Prayers may be suspended when they are not rejected. Your case," he says, "is in dependence not overthrown. God may give you that which will cover your expenses till the decision is given."

Have you been praying, and your efforts seem to have been repulsed? Have you sought the Lord and come away disappointed? Then trust Him still. Trust Him still. Lay hold of Him. And if the earth sinks beneath you, cling on! If storms should howl round about you, don't give up an inch! Let this woman, this godly, godly mother, be an example to you of heroic and courageous and persevering faith in Jesus.

May God so write it upon our hearts, for His name's sake. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we are truly rebuked by the greatness of this dear woman's faith. We pray, Lord God Almighty, so kindle in us such a faith that will not let You go. We pray for those amongst us whose hearts are weary and torn and sad. We pray, give them perseverance; give them strength; give them stick-ability in the midst of the storm; to lay hold upon You and not to let You go. Grow us in our faith, we pray, and then we will see the trial to have been for a good end and a good cause. So bless us, we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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