

Faith that Pleases Jesus

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Mark 7:24-30

Turn in your Bibles with me this morning to Mark 7:24-30. As you do, consider this question, “Does your faith delight Jesus?” In our text this morning, we’ll see what faith looks like that delights Jesus. We’ve reached the halfway point in our study of Mark’s gospel, but we’re already in the last year of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry. Remember, Mark’s writing style is like a newsreel. He briskly moves from scene to scene, highlighting Jesus’ ministry. Chapter 7 opened with Jesus challenging the Scribes and Pharisees concerning the origin of impurity. The Jewish religious leaders taught that uncleanness came from the outside; but Jesus contended that defilement or impurity was a result, not of external contaminants, but rather the heart – the enemy is within. Jesus has ministered almost exclusively in and around Galilee, to a predominantly Jewish audience, up to this point. Unfortunately, that has produced very little fruit. The Pharisees and the rest of the religious elite hate Him, animosity is building, and it won’t be long before they call for His death. So Jesus and His disciples leave Israel altogether and travel deep into Gentile territory. That’s where our text picks up this morning. It’s here, in the Gentile, pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon that Jesus finds the type of faith He’s been looking for. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens these words:

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. Mark 7:24–30

Brothers and sisters, “The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever” Isaiah 40:8.

Mark says, “And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon.” It’s presumed that Jesus was in search of a little down time with his disciples. Jesus tried to withdraw to a desolate place with His disciples back in 6:30-34, but was unsuccessful then as well. Everywhere Jesus went, He was pursued by crowds (mostly spectators eager to see what He would do next). Here, He and

his disciples leave the Jewish territory of Galilee altogether and travels some 50 miles northwest to the Gentile, pagan region of Tyre and Sidon – the two main Mediterranean cities in Phoenicia.

Mark writes, “And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.” Jesus’ magnetism makes his retirement short-lived. One man said of Jesus, “Like perfume betrays itself, so He whose name is perfume poured out cannot be hid.” Jesus was a long way from “home,” but even so, the Gentile residents of Tyre and Sidon knew who He was. Back in chapter 3, after Jesus healed a man’s withered hand, Mark writes in verses 7-8, “Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around *Tyre and Sidon*. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him.” Suffice it to say, there were few places where word of Jesus had probably not spread. Though we can’t know for certain, it’s very possible the woman Jesus encounters in verse 25 was among the crowd in Mark 3:7-8 who had come to see Jesus from Tyre and Sidon. What I want us to focus on this morning is the faith of this woman. I think there are three clear characteristics of faith presented to us in the text that greatly delight Jesus.

I. FAITH THAT PLEASES JESUS IS HUMBLE. (v.25-26a)

But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth.

As we’ve seen in previous chapters, there is very little down time in the life and ministry of Jesus and His disciples. Not wanting anyone to know they had arrived in town didn’t last long. Mark tells us, “Immediately (a favorite word of his) a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of Him and came and fell down at His feet.” Again, this woman very well might have been among the crowd in Mark 3:7-8 who had traveled from the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon to see Jesus - this “miracle worker” from Galilee. In any event, she knows exactly who Jesus is. And she has an insurmountable problem. Her young daughter has an unclean spirit. Remember, unclean spirit is just another way of saying demon-possessed.

We have encountered several demon-possessed individuals already in our study of Mark. We encountered the man in the synagogue who cried out to Jesus (1:23), the Gerasene man who lived among the tombs (5:2), those the apostles were given authority over when Jesus sent them out two by two (6:13), and the young girl here in our text. It is possible that the woman’s daughter had been utterly terrorized by the demon just like the young boy that we will encounter in chapter 9. The demon in this little boy would throw him to the ground and cause him to foam at the mouth, grind his teeth, and become rigid (9:18). And if that isn’t bad enough, this demon is said to have often cast him into fire and water in an attempt to destroy him (9:22). It’s possible this woman’s daughter was tormented similarly – we don’t know. But we do know that this mother was broken over the state of her daughter and she saw hope in Jesus.

As this woman approaches Jesus, I want you to notice her posture. Mark says, “She came to Him and fell down at His feet.” This was most certainly a humble entreaty. Matthew records in his parallel account of this story that she was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon” Matthew 15:22. Faith is a buzzword in our culture. You hear people say often, “I am a believer or I’m a person of faith.” But the question is, believer in whom? Faith in what? Belief and faith must be in the right object. You have to put your faith in something true – someone true. Jesus Christ is the only legitimate object of faith. This woman humbly recognized that and bowed at Jesus feet. Have you?

This woman is not only humble, but she is also repentant. She cries out, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” Mercy assumes unworthiness. This woman recognizes that she is unworthy and undeserving – she’s repentant. She comes to Jesus, the right object (person) of faith, but she also comes with the right attitude – humility. We can see this lady mirrored in David’s words in Psalm 51:17, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Likewise, Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” Matthew 5:3.

It’s interesting to note how Mark highlights this woman’s heritage. He describes her in the beginning of verse 26 saying, “Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth.” This description tells us that this woman, at least from a Jewish perspective, had absolutely nothing going for her. First, she was a Gentile. That meant she was Greek by religion and therefore a pagan idolater – probably a Baal worshipper. The Jewish religious system of clean and unclean extended far beyond foods. The Jews applied it to people, especially the Gentiles. The Gentiles were considered by the Jews to be unclean, unfit, unworthy, defiled, aliens of the covenants of God, a cursed people, under divine judgment, and therefore separated from the life of God.

Not only was she a Gentile, but Mark also refers to her as Syrophenician - part Syrian and part Phoenician. She didn’t speak Hebrew or Aramaic, but rather the “foreign language” of Syria. Matthew calls her a Canaanite (Matthew 15:22). Interestingly enough, the Canaanites of whom she was a descendant, were the people group whom God had commanded Israel to conquer and “utterly destroy” (Deut. 7:2). Why the detailed description? Mark describes this woman in such detail so that we understand that this lady who comes and falls at Jesus’ feet couldn’t be more non-Jewish? What is the significance of that? It’s significant because it sets up an undeniable contrast in our text this morning between the rejection of Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees, and the humble acceptance of Jesus by a Gentile, pagan woman. A Gentile woman living in an idolatrous city gave the honor to Jesus that the leaders of Israel refused to give. John wrote of Jesus, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” John 1:11–12.

Question: Is your faith humble?

II. FAITH THAT PLEASES JESUS IS PERSISTENT. (v.26b-27)

And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Here she is at Jesus' feet expressing humble faith, and what is she asking? Mark writes, "She begged Him to cast the demon out of her daughter." The Greek word begged here is in the imperfect tense. That means that the woman didn't just ask once, she persistently asked or kept on asking. Matthew's account says that Jesus at first didn't answer the woman. And the disciples, though they are growing, still don't get it. The disciples, in Matthew's account, actually beg (same word) Jesus to silence the woman requesting, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us" Matthew 15:23. But the disciples' attempt to hush her need wasn't enough to quiet this mother – she was persistent.

How does Jesus respond? Look at verse 27. He says, "Let the little children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Jesus' comparison between the children and the dogs appears to be a refusal to meet her request. But, there is an important distinction that we need to be aware of here, lest Jesus' reply to the woman seem cold, insensitive, and brash. The Jews thought of the Gentiles as dogs – wild, dirty, scavengers of the street, an unwanted nuisance. But Jesus didn't use the ordinary Greek word for wild dog (kuōn) here, as the Jews would have referred to the Gentiles. Instead, Jesus used the diminutive word for little dog (kunarion) – that of a family pet. The family dog would sit under the table and wait for what fell on the floor or for what was offered from its master.

What exactly do Jesus' words mean? It should be clear that he doesn't share the Jewish prejudice against the Gentiles, so what does Jesus mean when He says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Jesus is simply saying the same thing that Paul said in Romans 1:16. Paul wrote, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Jesus is simply affirming the fact that the gospel was first to be made manifest to Israel, the privileged children of God, and subsequently, the time had not yet come for its blessing to be extended to the Gentiles.

I think Jesus responded to the woman the way He did so that He might test her faith. We have to remember that miracle workers were a dime a dozen in the Hellenistic world of the first century. Throngs of people were attracted to these so-called miracle workers. Even in the predominantly Jewish territory of Galilee, Jesus had been regarded as one of these "divine individuals" of whom the masses paraded to for his benefactions (3:7-10, 6:53-56). But the power of God is not dispensed in connection with superstition and magic, but rather in response to genuine faith. So Jesus tests the genuineness of the woman's faith.

But in light of the larger context of this passage, I am persuaded that Jesus responded the way He did for another reason as well. Remember, Jesus and His disciples had just recently been confronted by the Scribes and Pharisees as to why they didn't hold to the traditions of the elders. Remember, the Jewish elite had added their own oral traditions to the Law of God and elevated it so highly, that it even superseded the authority of God's revealed Word. Contained in those oral traditions were deep-rooted prejudices against the Gentiles. To the Jews, the Gentiles were themselves considered to be unclean.

I think that Jesus, Himself not holding the predominantly held Jewish prejudice against the Gentiles, uses this language for the sake of His disciples who were not impervious to such merciless thinking. Just as the disciples had been brought up under the legalistic teaching of the religious elite as it pertains to foods that were either clean or unclean, so they were also influenced by the common assumption that particular people groups were unclean. I think what Jesus is doing here is teaching His disciples that even the most unlikely prospect, a Canaanite, a Gentile, pagan, could humbly *ask* for and *receive* His grace and mercy. The Gentiles, contrary to wide-held belief, were not outside the mercy of God. In faith, they had access to the very same ministry of Jesus, John 1:11-12.

Here is a noteworthy principle: Don't ever rule out who might come to Christ! In Matthew's account of this story Jesus reminded the woman that he had been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But we can't forget that Jesus told His disciples in John 10:16, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Jesus' encounter with a pagan Gentile woman who exhibited faith was a forecast, so to speak, of the coming Gentile inclusion. The gospel came through the Jews (John 4:22) and first to the Jews, but it was never intended to be only for them. You see, Israel was never intended to be the end of God's redemptive plan or saving purposes; rather, they were to be a means to an end. The reason Jesus came to Israel first is so that Israel could be the means of Gentile salvation. The story before us this morning is meant to be a preview of how the gospel would spread into the Gentile world. This was an important lesson for the disciples if they were going to obey Jesus' last command to "make disciples of all nations"!

Question: Is your faith persistent?

III. FAITH THAT PLEASES JESUS IS CONFIDENT. (v.28)

But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Do you see what's happening here? This woman, a Canaanite, Gentile pagan, came to Jesus, threw herself at His feet, begged that He might cast a demon out of her young daughter and Jesus seemingly denies her request. But his momma isn't ready to take no for an answer. Her reply to Jesus is laced both with wit and confident trust. She says, "Yes, Lord, I understand that the

children (Jews) must be fed first, but the little dogs (Gentiles) must also eat, for even the dogs that are under the table eat the children's crumbs." In other words, if the dogs eat the crumbs that fall to the ground from the table, aren't they then fed at the same time as the children? She is in effect saying, "Let the children be fed, but allow the dogs to enjoy the crumbs." What wit and what humility. She didn't respond with resentment that Jesus referred to her as a dog, and furthermore, all she asked for was mere crumbs - what faith! The writer of Hebrews says, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" Hebrews 11:6.

Question: Is your faith God-confident?

IV. JESUS RESPONDS TO HUMBLE, PERSISTENT, CONFIDENT FAITH WITH GRACE. (vs. 29-30)

And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

It would be foolish to presume that it was the woman's persistence which earned Jesus' attention and healing power. She knew she did not deserve Jesus' help, that she was unworthy of Him, and that her only hope for undeserved forgiveness was in His gracious mercy. By definition, the person who asks for mercy asks for something undeserved. This woman did not come *demanding* but rather *pleading*. She didn't ask for Jesus' help on the basis of her own goodness but rather on the basis of His.¹ So her persistence didn't earn Jesus' favor, but it did *demonstrate* her faith!

And how did Jesus respond? Look at the text, "And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone."

Matthew writes, "Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great (mega) is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly" Matthew 15:28. What was it that was great about this woman's faith? This woman's faith was not great because it was stronger or more sincere or mature than the faith of many Jews who believed in Christ but because it was based on so little light. Peter was said to have had little faith when he jumped out of the boat on the Sea of Galilee and tried to walk to Jesus. This woman's faith wasn't considered great because it was more mature, but rather because it came with humility, persistence, and trust.

Jesus delights in humble, persistent, confident faith like the woman who kept returning to the judge pleading her case, who for a while refused, but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming" Luke 18:4-5.

¹John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 469.

This woman came to Jesus on the other side of the cross. She, unlike us, didn't have the full revelation of God's love demonstrated in the death of Christ (Romans 5:8). We have seen what she had not. We have all been raised with varying degrees of spiritual influence – some less and others more. But just like Jesus met the needs of this woman and restored her tormented daughter, He can also heal your heart. Just like he tamed the sin and madness of the demon-possessed man in chapter 5, so he can tame the sin and madness in your heart. He can heal that insidiously evil heart that we all have which defiles and condemns us. But what's required? You must have humble faith, and that humble faith must bring you to Jesus (right object). Here is the promise from Jesus... He said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" Matthew 11:28–30. Do you have a faith that Jesus delights in?

CLOSING BENEDICTION

Hear this benediction as we bring our corporate worship to a close. The writer of Hebrews says, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" Hebrews 11:6. And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!