

A Master Stroke

By Mark Webb

“Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. 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. But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and besought Him, saying, send her away; for she crieth after us. But He answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped Him, saying, Lord, help me. But He answered and said, it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. 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 15:21-28).

There are those passages in the Word of God that teach and instruct us. There are those that reprove and correct us. Then there are those that paint such glorious pictures that, while they may instruct or correct, our first reaction is just to stand still and proclaim with David, these things are "too high for me". Such is our text. Martin Luther probably said it best when he called this passage "a master stroke".

Two Grand Masters were competing for the World Chess Championship many years ago, when suddenly one of them made a surprise move, sacrificing his queen, and announcing "mate in two!" The crowd was stunned in unbelief. But once they realized the brilliance of his strategy they literally threw money on the board to express admiration at having witnessed a master stroke.

You might say Beethoven's "5th Symphony" was his master stroke, or Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." Some of us baby-boomers probably thought "Sergeant Peppers" was the Beatles' master stroke. We won't ask how many still think that! The painting of "The Last Supper" was Leonardo Davinci's master stroke. "Romeo and Juliet" was Shakespeare's master stroke.

Now we would not want to say that the Bible is a master stroke, for being the very Word of the living God, we are talking about another order of magnitude. But the Bible contains statements by ordinary people that we could say are master strokes. Who will ever forget the words of Job? “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Even Jesus' enemies have been known to deliver master strokes in the Bible. "Never man spake like this man," said the officers of the temple. Remember the words of the centurion as the earth quaked at the Saviour's death? "Truly this man was the Son of God." "Truth, Lord," said this woman of Canaan, "yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Does not her testimony melt our hearts like wax? Oh, my! Dear reader, we are dealing here with:

A Master Stroke of Persevering Faith.

"Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David," she cried. But He answered not a word. That would have discouraged a lot of us right there. "Send her away," said the disciples to Jesus, "For she crieth after us." So obviously this thing had been going on for quite some time. Then the Lord told her she's not of the right race. That would have thinned out a ton of us! Not this woman. She came and worshipped Him saying just three words: "Lord, help me." Finally, Jesus called her a dog. Now that would have been the last straw, right? What did she say? "Truth, Lord, yet the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."

This woman knew nothing of the "Know So" salvation often propagated today, where a sinner is given the idea that if he will just nod his head to a few facts, and parrot someone else's prayer, that he will have his eternal destiny settled on a special end-of-the-month deal. This woman knew what it meant to ask, seek, and knock. In fact, she knew first hand, what it meant to "keep on asking, keep on seeking,

keep on knocking" (Matt. 7:7) as the original language was spoken.

I asked a young woman some time ago if she knew God. She said, "No." I said, "Maybe I can introduce you to Him." Her curt reply: "I tried to meet Him once, but it didn't work." She really tried hard, didn't she? By contrast, suppose a man was drowning but he knew there was an outstretched hand up there somewhere. Do you think he'd give up if he grabbed for it and missed on the first try? No, he'd keep on straining with his every breath until he laid hold of that saving hand. In the affluence of our day, most of us are oblivious to the fact that we are drowning in sin, in critical need of rescue.

This Canaanite woman was hungering and thirsting . . . She was desperate just for the crumbs from the Master's table, for she knew if they were from the Master's table they would be more than enough to satisfy. Like the prodigal son, she had come to the end of herself. Matthew 11:12 tells us "the kingdom of God suffers violence; and the violent take it by force." My, what a hard saying, but our text provides a living illustration of the meaning! Those who truly come to Christ must be broken, with a sense of urgency, despairing of all hope in themselves. This woman experienced what Jesus taught when he said to "strive (literally agonize) to enter in at the straight and narrow gate." What a master stroke of persevering faith. And then consider secondly, we have before us:

A Master Stroke of Mystery.

Is there not something mysterious going on here? At first, Jesus answered her not a word, then He said she was of the wrong race, and then He called her a dog. Does it not seem rather strange for our Lord--the One Who is full of grace and truth; the One Who delights in mercy--to deal with one of us this way? Harsh? Out of character? Mysterious?

It is worth noting as we study the life of Christ, that this is the only event recorded on this entire trip to Tyre and Sidon. As far as we know, He preached no sermon, saved no one, performed no other miracles. Apparently, He made the entire trip just to keep this one appointment. Still, you say, there is something going on here that doesn't meet the eye, for He seems to deal so sternly with her. Perhaps an illustration will help put this thing in proper perspective.

Imagine that you are holding in your hand a beautiful diamond ring. As you admire its splendor, what is the tendency? Is it not to turn it first this way and then that in order to see it sparkle in different lights? Our Lord knew He had a precious gem of faith in His hands and He wanted to see it glisten as He answered her not a word. He wished to see it radiate as He told her she was of the wrong race. He desired to see it shine forth like the morning sun as He called her a dog! And when He had brought her through the fire and burned off all the dross, He set her forth as gold, and said, "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt."

There is only one other place in all the Bible where Jesus said He saw "great faith". It is recorded in Matthew Chapter 8, where the Roman centurion came beseeching Him saying, "Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented." Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed . . ." When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to them that followed, "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." In both cases, the key virtue we observe in the one coming to Jesus is humility . . . humility . . . humility. Which brings me to my last point. Yes, of course, this passage is:

A Master Stroke of Humility.

There are two kingdoms in this world. Just two. You may have thought there were many. You may have thought there were the kingdoms of the United States, England, Russia, China, Japan, etc. But there are really just two that are of any consequence: the Kingdom of Satan (Luke 4:5, 6), and the Kingdom of Christ (Luke 1:32, 33). The subjects of the former are characterized by pride, arrogance, and rebellion,

much like their king (John 8:44); while the subjects of the latter are characterized by meekness, humility, and submission, much like their King (Matt. 20:20-28). The Bible teaches from cover to cover that we are either in one kingdom or the other.

Now sometimes, when I look at your life, it's very difficult for me to tell which kingdom you're really in. Sometimes when you look at my life, it's difficult for you to tell which kingdom I'm really in. But is there any doubt about this woman? True, our text does not say Christ justified her; it just says he healed her daughter. But the same Christ who healed her daughter is the One Who said, "blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The same Christ who healed her daughter is the One Who said, "whosoever shall humble himself . . . is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." In light of these truths, wouldn't you just be willing to go out on a limb, and wager that this woman is a child of God? Yea, if I were a gambler, I'd "bet the ranch" that this woman is in glory today, probably worshipping at the feet of the Saviour as we speak. Not that there was any good thing in her to merit God's favor. Oh, no. She was a ruined, undone sinner, just like the rest of us, for "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). But how blessed she appears in her meekness, as she casts herself on the mercy of God; as she humbles herself in the sight of the Lord.

What might we have said if the Master had called us dogs? I can hear us now: "Oh, Lord, we may not be what we ought to be and we're certainly not what we're going to be. But, Lord, we're not dogs. You deal harshly with us, Lord." What did this woman say? "Truth, Lord, yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Ah, what a master stroke of humility.

If I Could Paint a Picture

If I could paint a picture of this scene, I'd have Jesus standing there, with His disciples in the background. But I'd have this woman on her knees, crawling to the feet of the Saviour, empty cup in hand, begging crumbs. Dear reader, do you hunger and thirst after righteousness today? I can't help you. But I can point you to the One Who can: Jesus Christ. You say, "But He's not here." That is true. He is on His throne in glory. But I can tell you how to get there: climb down off your high horse, get on your knees, and start crawling. You ask, "Are you sure I have to crawl?" Yes. I'm sure. Jesus said, "Whosoever exalts himself shall be abased and he that humbles himself shall be exalted."

Now the trail is hard to follow at first. But just keep crawling. When you reach mount Calvary and you've had your sins washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, then you'll be able to see more clearly. Now the way is still rough and steep after that, but keep crawling. When you reach His throne of grace, you'll find that, just as it was He Who really was secretly sustaining this woman's faith (Phil. 2:13), it was really He Who led you all the way, like a shepherd leads his sheep, right to that throne of grace, where you'll receive not crumbs, but the wedding feast (Rev. 19:9)! Isn't it just like God? You come as this humble woman begging crumbs, and you get the wedding feast. You come as the proud Pharisee, thinking you deserve the wedding feast, and you don't even get the crumbs.

You say, "There must be an easier way." Oh, yes, there is. But it leads to destruction (Mt. 7:13-14). If you want the Saviour, you're going to have to come the narrow way and you're going to have to do some crawling.

Lord, may You be pleased to grant that we would be numbered with those who, like this woman of Canaan, have persevered in faith; with those who have humbled themselves in Your sight, just as Your Son humbled Himself even to the death of the cross. Might we be delighted to take our rightful place before You: in the dust! Give us a mind-set, oh Lord, that would make us content if for all eternity we were to do no other than feed from the crumbs which fall from the Master's table. In the Name of the One Who came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many, Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.