

The logo for Trinity Bible Church Dallas features the words "TRINITY BIBLE CHURCH DALLAS" in a clean, sans-serif font. The text is centered and arranged in three lines. Behind the text is a faint, stylized graphic of an open book with a cross on top, all set against a light gray background.

TRINITY
BIBLE CHURCH
DALLAS

The Sermon

Matthew 15:21-28

"The Mother Who Would Not Go Away"

TRANSCRIPT

This morning I want to look at this as a singular incident in the earthly life of Christ. We meet this desperate mother whose faith is truly great. We also get a look at Jesus as we have never seen him before. The woman has a demon possessed daughter and she seeks Jesus' help for this girl, but in this instance the Lord seems uncharacteristically aloof and abrupt and even apathetic about this poor woman's plight. And this is not how we know Jesus to be.

In fact if Jesus is known for anything it is his gracious compassion for afflicted people. Isaiah 42:3 is that famous messianic prophecy which Jesus himself quoted verbatim, Matthew 12:20, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory." That's a prophetic description of Jesus' tender grace. The "smoldering wick" that refers to the flax in a lamp that is when it's used up and burnt out you can always tell when a lamp light is about to expire because the wick starts to smoke and smolder. You would normally just snuff it out and refill the oil in the lamp and trim away the burnt portion of that wick or put in a whole new wick.

A reed in Scripture is always a symbol of weakness. It was a reed you know is a hollow stalk from a grass-like plant that grows along the riverbank and a reed is notoriously weak and brittle, but you can whittle holes in a reed and make a little flute from it. Shepherds used to use these to calm their

sheep. And to this day in fact reeds are used to make mouthpiece, part of the mouthpiece in woodwind instrument. They wear out easily when you use them. Clarinet reeds are sold in boxes of ten. Shepherds' flutes rarely lasted more than a day. They would get damp and stop working and when they wear out you just snap it in two and make a new one.

So the point of this prophecy, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench," that's to show the tender compassion of Christ. He didn't throw people away. He always dealt with broken and used up people not by discarding them, but by healing them, by renewing their strengths so that they would mount up with wings like eagles and they could run and not be weary and they could walk and not faint.

You see this for example when Jesus encounters a man who is totally insane, living in a graveyard naked, cutting himself with stones because his mind and his body were possessed by a whole legion of demons and Jesus cast those demons into a herd of pigs. In the very next scene you see that man delivered, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right minds Scripture says. And that was the way of Jesus. Instead of rejecting or condemning broken people he delighted in redeeming them. "For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world through him might be saved," that's John 3:17 and Luke 19:10 says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

You know Jesus often had harsh or dismissive words for scribes and Pharisees and other people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. But to sinners who confessed their own guilt or needy people who came seeking freedom from sins, bondage, or relief from the bitter consequences of their sins Jesus always offered redemption and he did it with such grace and compassion that his enemies actually scolded him for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners. And that was an accusation Jesus accepted gladly. He came after all to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering sight to the blind and to set at liberty those who were oppressed.

So when the Pharisees grumbled about this and challenged Jesus about being the dinner guest in the homes of notorious sinners Jesus said, "Those who are well don't need a physician, but those who are sick," he said, that's when he said, "I've come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." And in fact I think this was perhaps Jesus' most surprising and memorable characteristic. Almost every time you see Jesus dealing with someone who comes from outside the circle of acceptable society he is always tender and compassionate, warm, friendly, approachable.

And in fact usually Jesus is the one who reaches out, like the woman at the well or the man who was blind from birth in John 9. Never do you see him turning away anyone who comes to him for help or healing, except here.

Just a chapter before this in Matthew 14:34 you read that, "Jesus and his disciples came to the land at Gennesaret and when the men of that place recognized him they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment and as many as touched it were made well." Crowds of needy people gathered around him, pressed around him and he always healed them all.

Luke 4:40, "All those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them" Scripture says, "and healed them all." Matthew 4:24, "They brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them all." Matthew 12:15, "Many followed him, and he healed them all," repeatedly Scripture says this.

This is one of the unique and outstanding characteristics of Jesus' ministry. There was no one he couldn't heal. There was no one so deeply in bondage to sin that he couldn't deliver them and he did deliver them all. He simply

did not turn people away. And it didn't matter how loathsome or guilty or socially unacceptable a person was Jesus always received those who came to him seeking mercy. He said, "Come to me all who labor and are heavily laden and I will give you rest" and then he said, "Whoever comes to me I will not cast out" and he kept that promise.

So this vignette that we're looking at today puts Jesus in a rare light, in a light we've never seen him before and you'll never see him again. But here he's looking for all the world as if he is detached and distant and even derogatory towards this woman who comes to him for help.

Now so let's look at this account and see what's going on. Here's the context. Jesus had just had one of those major public conflicts with the Pharisees, these powerful religious leaders who were following him around Galilee. They had probably come all the way from Jerusalem looking for a way to accuse him. They were disparately seeking something with which to discredit him and they kept condemning him for things like not following their Sabbath rules or not observing all the extra biblical regulations they had made up for themselves regarding hand washing and ceremonial cleanness.

And in the previous chapter Matthew 14 you have the feeding of the 5,000, one of Jesus' most spectacular public miracles. Matthew 14:19-20 says, "Jesus broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the crowds and they all ate and were satisfied." There's nothing there about ceremonial washing. There weren't any wet naps passed out with the food. And so at the start of Matthew 15, "Some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus all the way from Jerusalem" this was therefore probably an official delegation sent most likely from the ruling council of the Sanhedrin and they said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders, for they do not wash their hands when they eat?" A lot of mothers can sympathize with that.

And at that point Jesus unleashes one of his angriest diatribes ever against the phony public self-righteousness of these Pharisees. Verse 14 for example he says this about the Pharisees, "Let them alone, they're blind guides and if the blind leads the blind they'll both fall into a pit." So he basically writes them off. When he says, "Let them alone," that is the biblical equivalent of saying, "Forget them, ignore them, they're headed for destruction. They're going to lead you into a ditch."

So this is one of the earliest in what became a long series of public denunciations that Jesus aimed at the Pharisees. It becomes a consistent thread especially in the gospel of Matthew and that thread includes Jesus' words about the unpardonable sin in Matthew 12. I hope you know that his warning about the unpardonable sin, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit it was a specific blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that was actually aimed at these phony religious leaders who fully understood that Jesus was the true Messiah. He fulfilled every prophecy they were looking for the Messiah. They knew who he was, but they didn't like him. They rejected him anyway even though he knew they knew he was the legitimate Messiah and rejected him with such force and finality that they had already Scripture says decided that they were going to put him to death at the first opportunity. That was the unpardonable sin, it's not something you can commit by accident.

Jesus then has this long war against Phariseeism that culminates in chapter 3 or sorry chapter 23, Matthew 23 is a chapter-long Jeremiah ad against the religious elite and it ends that chapter Matthew 23 with a summary judgment. Matthew 23:38 where he says to them, "Your house is left to you desolate." You know from early adolescence when Jesus got separated from his early parents in Jerusalem until that decisive moment at the end of Matthew 23 Jesus always referred to the Temple as "My father's house." "Don't make my Father's house a house of trade."

Now suddenly he's speaking to the Pharisees, he calls it "your house," "Your house is left to you desolate." And then Jesus departs from the Temple for the last time leaving it devoid of all heavenly glory, bereft of the

divine presence, spiritually desolate and within a generation then the Temple was utterly destroyed by the Roman army and it's never been rebuilt even to this day.

It's clear that these troubled interactions with the Pharisees exhausted Jesus. He was exhausted by it. He was you know truly human and in his humanity he experienced all the normal non-sinful weaknesses of human flesh. Hebrew 4:15, "We have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities." He knew those infirmities. He grew weary, he got thirsty, he became hungry just like you and I do. He felt the depths of sadness and the cares of earthly life, he experienced all of that the same as we do and he needed rest just like you and I do. And run-ins like this with the Pharisees left him mentally, emotionally, and physically spent and we know that because on several occasions he took time off from public ministry or he tried too; he was never successful at it.

In fact in Mark 6:31 for example he says to the disciples, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest awhile. For many were coming to him and going and they had no leisure even to eat and they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves." That's Mark 6:31, but listen to Mark 6:33, this is what happened, "Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. And so when he went ashore and saw a great crowd he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them many things." So he never got that rest that he set out to get.

And something similar happens in Mark 1 after Jesus he heals a leper. He tells that man, "See that you say nothing to anyone but go and show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded for proof to them." But then the very next verse says, that the "Cleansed leper went out and began to talk freely about it and to spread the news so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but stayed out in desolate places and people were coming to him even out in the desolate places come to him from every quarter." Even in the most desolate places Jesus

couldn't get any rest. Multitudes would follow him everywhere he went and they made it impossible for him to take time off from public ministry.

And so here in Matthew 15 after that run in with those Pharisees who had come all the way from Jerusalem just to oppose him Jesus quietly, secretly withdraws with the disciples to a place near the coast on the Mediterranean, outside the boundaries of Israel. He's actually left the territory of Israel. Matthew 5:21, "And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon." That is north of Israel in a region that today is part of Lebanon, right on the coast. It was known as "Phoenicia" in Roman times and it was a thoroughly Gentile district. Going there was a way for Jesus to escape the throngs of people that he faced everywhere he went in Israel. And so all of this was done very secretly.

By now Jesus is desperate to get some time away and so he probably traveled with just a handful of his closest, most trustworthy disciples and they probably when under cover of night and he manages to arrive in the District of Tyre and Sidon without big crowds following him. He's not there to preach or to do any kind of public ministry, he's there to rest and to recover strength so that he could minister more effectively. By the way that's a good and wise thing to do. There are always overzealous people who feel guilty taking time to rest. Jesus who was the embodiment of Godly zeal didn't have that perspective. In fact the parallel passage in Mark 7:24 says this, "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know." He's looking for solitude, seclusion, and rest but the verse continues, "Yet he could not be hidden." Somehow even in that remote region Jesus was recognized and identified and word leaked out that he was there. Mark's gospel says, "This happened immediately."

But this time it wasn't a large multitude. This time it was just one very noisy and persistent woman. And she shows up and interrupts Jesus' R and R and she's a mom with a severely afflicted daughter who is in bondage to a destructive demon and this desperate mother is relentless. Matthew 15:22 and "Behold a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, 'Have mercy on me oh Lord Son of David! My daughter is severely

oppressed by a demon.' " And the verb tense there means that she was persistently unceasingly pleading for Jesus' help, this was a nonstop repetitive request.

Now bear in mind Jesus is secluded inside a house trying to get some sleep no doubt or spending time alone in prayer, as was his custom, trying to recharge his energy so that he would have the strength to face everything that he knew he lay ahead. And this time of rest we know from the context of everything else in Scripture this time of rest was long overdue. His heart was heavy and burdened. He had just emerged from this exhausting conflict with a powerful group of Pharisees and while he's secluded himself in this house the disciples are apparently outside assigned to stand guard to make sure that nothing and no one would interrupt Jesus' rest, but this one woman simply refused to take no for an answer and she wouldn't get away.

Notice even though she calls Jesus by a distinctly Jewish title, "Oh Lord," she says, "Son of David," so she has some background knowledge in the Old Testament scriptures, but it says she was a Canaanite woman from that region. That by the way is how the Jews of Jesus' day would refer to a Phoenician woman.

The early Canaanites, you know the biblical Canaanites were Old Testament people who had been driving for the Promise Land because of their extreme wickedness and by Jesus' time descendants of those Canaanite tribes from Moses' era had become a culture of merchants and seafarers intermarried with other people and all, so they're basically just Gentiles not known for being religious, they're seamen, sailors basically. The Jews considered them unclean. And in fact the reason they called them "Canaanites" was to express a measure of contempt because they were such pagans. This was simply not a region where the typical Jewish leader, religious leader would take his disciples for a vacation.

But that made it a place where Jesus might go away for a time from these incessant conflicts with the Pharisees. The Pharisees wouldn't follow him

there. He could perhaps get away from the pressing demands of curious, needy people who followed him everywhere and maybe here he could get some peace and quiet and rest or so it seemed until this woman showed up.

She was continually crying it says and the word in the Greek means "to cry out." It may mean that, I mean she may have been weeping as well, but the stress of this word is on the volume, not the tears. She is shouting at Jesus through the walls of the house at a volume intended to penetrate those walls. Kind of howling, high-volume shriek that is hard to hear and it grates on your nerves. And although the disciples were apparently task with guarding Jesus' solitude; they had this one job. They finally had to interrupt him to beg him to respond to this woman so that she would go away. Verse 23, "The disciples came and begged him say, "Send her away for she's crying out after us.' "

Now what's interesting about this whole passage is Jesus' response, including his initial lack of response at all. This is I think the most remarkable thing about this scene. Like I said it's Jesus like you've never seen him before and yet there is something even more remarkable in this account and that's what I want you to see. But first we need to work our way through this narrative. There are three stages in Jesus' dealing with this woman and all three of them show us Jesus in this uncharacteristic light. And so follow with me as we work our way through this text again and let's consider each stage in the shocking way Jesus interacts with this woman.

Stage One, he seems to disregard her. There are three of these if you want to write them down. Stage One, he seems to disregard her. His initial response to this woman's plea is total silence, he ignores her, verse 23, "But he did not answer her a word." Augustine famously said about that verse, "He who was the Word spoke not a word." You know the only other time you find Jesus refusing to answer is when he's put on trial, Mathew 27:12-14, "But when he was accused by the chief priest and elders he gave no answer and then Pilot said to him, 'Do you not hear how many things they testify against you,' " but he gave him no answer, not even to a single

charge. At least seven times Scripture tells us that, "When Jesus was charged by those who finally crucified him he opened not his mouth," seven times Scripture stresses that.

But what makes this account so unusual is that when needy people sought relief or healing normally there was no one more responsive than Jesus. This is the only time we are ever told that anyone's pleas for deliverance or help or healing were met by Jesus with his silence. And yet this is a more common experience that we might deduce from the gospel narratives isn't it, because we've all experienced this for reasons that we know in our hearts are good and gracious God does sometimes delay his answers to our prayers. Jesus himself taught that although God always hears and answers our prayers and he promises to hear and answer our prayers, nevertheless Jesus said, "We need to be persistent in our praying."

He told this parable in Luke 11:5-9 to illustrate that very point. Let me read it. Luke 11:5-9, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything.' " Jesus says, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs." In other words if you keep knocking long enough out of sheer anger he'll get up and answer. "And I tell you, ask," Jesus says, "and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." Jesus point is this: keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking even if the answer doesn't come immediately because Jesus – God is not like this, this person in Jesus' parable, he's eager to answer to us, he just does it in his own time and sometimes he wants us to pray persistently.

There's another parable in Luke 18:1-5 with a similar lesson. In fact mark your place here in Matthew 15 and let's look at this passage together, Luke 18:2, we'll start at verse 2. "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept

coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he 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.' " Then the lesson is Jesus goes on to give it is that God is not like that, he's not like that unjust judge, he answers not merely because we persist and annoy him, but because God loves both justice and mercy he's eager to answer.

So here's the postscript of that parable of the unjust judge verse 6, Jesus says, "Hear what the unjust unrighteous judge says." Verse 7, "And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you he will give justice to them speedily." Speedily he promises and yet despite this reassurance of God's willingness to answer our prayers speedily – speedily to the Lord is a relative thing isn't it? It does seem sometimes to us as if your prayers are met with silence.

You see an example of this in the experience of Elijah. You remember in the contest with the bail priests he prayed for fire from above. They were cutting themselves and praying for long times. He prayed a very simple prayer and immediately the answer came from heaven fire fell, consumed his offering and all of that. And yet later that same day, that very same day when he prayed for rain to break the drought he had to repeat that prayer six times before he saw any answer at all and further more the seventh time he prayed the only sign that God had heard his prayer came to him in the form of a tiny cloud the shape and size of a man's hand, which ultimately developed into a rain storm, but it seemed slow to come, at least it seemed to Elijah slow.

God's timing does sometimes seem slow to us. Remember according to 2 Peter 3:8, "A thousand years is to Lord as one day." And Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "God makes everything beautiful in his time." His timing is always perfect, but to us those answers can seem like they're awfully slow in coming and it sometimes feel like the Lord is responding to us with cold

silence when in fact he's just awaiting for the perfect time. And we're prone to get impatient and frustrated and Jesus understood that.

So what is the proper response? Jesus' point is very simple it's the same as response you see in Elijah just keep praying because the Lord loves faith that perseveres. He wants us to be persistent. And in fact look at this parable that Jesus told about this widow who pestered the unjust judge. I hope you're still there. We saw at the end of the parable how Jesus reminds his disciples that God is not like that selfish magistrate, he delights to answer our prayers speedily. And usually this is a secret of hermeneutics you may never have thought about, but normally when you read a parable the last line of the parable will give you the best clue about its central lesson. So if you want to know what the parable means look at the last line normally, but that's not the case here.

The main lesson of this story is given to us in verse 1, the verse I skipped. He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. So this parable is simply an encouragement for us to be persistent when we pray. The old term for this is importunity, to be importunate, mean to be persistently demanding, that's the dictionary definition of the word "importunity," be persistently demanding, keep asking. And the implication is that when the answer is delayed we should repeat our requests with increasing urgency. Importunity in prayer is always commended in Scripture. When it seems like God is ignoring our pleas the right response is importunity rather than impatience; keep asking.

And that's exactly what the disparate mother in our text did. So much so that it grated on the ears of the disciples. Back to Matthew 15. Matthew 15, look at verse 22, "She kept crying out 'Have mercy on me, oh Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon,' but he did not answer her a word." And the longer he stays silent the more shrill her repeated pleas begin to sound and that motivates the disciples to intercede on her behalf. They do this not necessarily out of compassion but mainly just they want to get rid of the annoyance. Second half of verse 23, "His disciples came and begged him saying, 'Send her away for she's crying out

after us.' " So now they're the ones begging. And don't misunderstand this it wasn't that they wanted Jesus to shoo her away or make her go away without responding to her plea, they could have done that if that's what they wanted.

They're probably thinking much like the unrighteous judge in that parable, "Just give her what she wants if for no other reason than just to shut her up." They knew, the disciples knew only Jesus could give her what she wanted and so they take the case to him. And in effect now they're prayers, their earnest pleas to Christ for peace and quiet join in agreement with her prayers for mercy and now it's a group petition. And amazingly Jesus still doesn't respond with an immediate, "Yes."

That brings us to the second stage of this drama. Stage One he seems to disregard her. Stage Two he seems to discourage her. His reply to the request from the disciples is I think even more stunning and more unexpected than his silence in the face of her original pleas. Verse 24, he answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." As if the silence weren't cold enough he now responds with what appears to be outright rejection.

Now think this through. What he says is perfectly true, his primary mission was to the Nation of Israel. He had come as their promised Messiah and in fact in almost identical words when he called the disciples and sent them out on their first mission in Matthew 10:5-6 he told them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel," because he had come as Israel's king. He was the rightful occupant of David's throne and his duty as shepherd to the Lord's people was first to call the lost sheep of the House of Israel. He was in that stage of his ministry, Roman 1:16, "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes but to the Jew first." And Jesus is as I said still in that phase of his ministry, he's announcing the Kingdom to Israel.

So he's speaking truthfully here, this is not a gratuitous insult, this is an honest declaration about what he was called to do, but while it's true, it's not a truth that is suited to encourage this woman. Spurgeon says about this, "He announced to her a fact which could not possibly assist or strengthen her faith." Specifically think about this, he's bringing up the subject of election and I'll say more on that later.

But I love this, this statement from Jesus which probably would have come across as a snub or a cold shoulder to the average person, it doesn't faze this woman at all. The typical person might have turned away or replied with coarse words or angry accusations or you know got the social justice warriors after Jesus, but she sees it as an open door. Maybe it literally was an open door because remember he's in a house and so the disciples had to open the door to this place of seclusion in order to give Jesus the message and get his answer back, so the door is open at least a crack. She ignores the message and just pushes pass the disciples who had been assigned to act as Jesus' bodyguards and she goes right into the house where Jesus was. We know that because it says, "She feel at Jesus' feet," verse 25, "She came and knelt before him saying Lord, help me."

Now that's the same plea she's been making, but now she abbreviates it into the fewest possible words, "Lord, help me." This is a scene full of pathos and unless you are totally inhuman there's just no way to picture this in your mind without feeling profound empathy for this poor woman. And although Jesus is God he's not inhuman, he was a perfect human and he's a thousand times more tenderhearted and empathic than you or me or anyone we've ever known.

You see that clearly in Scripture every other times falls at his feet. You know in Luke 7 when a woman of ill repute anoints his feet and she has nothing but her hair to wipe them with and the Pharisees were disgusted by that, but Jesus showed that woman the ultimate compassion. He forgave her completely and he did that right in a Pharisee's home to the chagrin of these self-righteous Pharisees.

And then just one chapter after that Luke 8:41, Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue falls at Jesus' feet and implores him to come and heal his dying daughter and Jesus' responds to that guy immediately. And while he's on the way to Jarius' house a woman who had been ceremonially unclean for 12 long years touched the hem of his garment and any Pharisee, any other religious leader would have condemned and cursed her for what they would have deemed to be a defiling touch. The Scriptures says, "When the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling and fell down before him" so she's at his feet now, "and declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed." And Jesus' response to that woman also immediate and tenderhearted. He said to her to daughter, "Your faith has made you well, go in peace."

In Luke 10 Jesus commends Mary for sitting at his feet when Martha wanted to scold her for not doing her part to serve. In short every time in Scripture when someone falls at Jesus' feet he never ever rebuffs them except here.

And now we reach Stage Three and to me this is the most shocking part of this whole surprising drama. To review, Stage One he seems to disregard her; Stage Two he seems to discourage her; now Stage Three he seems to disrespect her.

And when this woman kneeling at Jesus' feet finally begs him to his face, "Lord, help me," his reply sounds like a deliberate insult. Throughout this entire subplot Jesus has given every appearance of icy indifference towards this poor woman. So far that's all he's shown. His first response is cold silence, then he gives her the cold shoulder, now he responds with a cold putdown or so it appears, verse 26 and he answers, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Now dogs of course especially in Israel among Jews dogs were considered unclean, they were unclean animals, they were unclean so you didn't have them as pets. In Old Testament times no one would have a pet dog. By

Jesus' time the first century dogs had been domesticated and Romans often kept them as pets. I've actually seen a mosaic on the floor of a home that was uncovered when Pompeii was dug out of the volcanic ash and it's a beautiful mosaic with a picture of a dog on a leash with the words in Latin, cave canem, which means "beware of the dog," it's a cool thing. I wanted to get one for our front porch, Darlene said, "No." But there were warning signs like that, "Beware of the dog," all over Pompeii. There are also some plaster casts of dogs that died in that disaster and you can see that the dogs had collars, which indicates they were household pets among Gentiles that was.

One other point here. When Jesus answers this woman he uses the diminutive form of the Greek word for dogs. So it's the idea of a small dog, a lap dog, a pet dog, which maybe mitigates the insult somewhat, but most people would say and probably would have said even in Jesus' time, "It's not really politically correct to compare a desperate woman to a dog." In fact there are those who would try to make this whole thing a point of major controversy.

I found an article about this passage from the August 2011 issue of that bastion of political correctness The Huffington Post and it was an article written by a woman whose bio says she's an ordained Lutheran minister and she basically treats Jesus as an unenlightened bigot. And in her account the woman is the teacher and the hero of this story and in the end she says this and I'm quoting from her, she says, "Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and the face of this Canaanite woman." She claims Jesus was forever changed by this encounter. She actually uses these words, again I'm quoting her, "Jesus finally heard and came to believe," she says. It's one of the worst pieces of bible butchery I've ever encountered from someone who pretends to be a minister.

And in fact if you can read Matthew's gospel and come to that conclusion it seems to me you're reading comprehension skills are pathetic. But to be fair it does – it is true that likening her to a dog sounds like an insult. But what I want you to notice is that the Canaanite woman herself doesn't seem

to take it that way. She doesn't argue the point, she doesn't become indignant, she doesn't even disagree with the characterization, in fact she affirms it, she agrees with Jesus. In fact I love how the King James Version translates her reply. Here's verse 27 from the King James, "And she said 'Truth Lord, yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from master's table.' " In other words she affirms what he just said, "Truth, Lord." That by the way is a literal translation of the what she says.

This is an example of why I don't particularly like the NIV. The NIV makes it sound as if she disagrees with Jesus. Here's the NIV, verses 26 and 27, "Jesus replied, 'It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.' 'Yes it is Lord,' she said, 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that falls from their master's table.' " They make it sound like she contradicts him. But I think one of the most important things here is that's not how this conversation went at all and this is crucial to the point of the story this is why Jesus commends her faith at the end. She freely affirms the truth of what he said. "Truth, Lord, yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table" or as the ESV has it, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

There's a confession of faith implied in those words. Jesus calls her a "dog" and she barks in agreement. This is really an amazing exchange. She doesn't argue or contradict him, she never does, she just keeps pressing her case. Nothing he ever says or does even though it sounds to us like it's harsh it doesn't deter her at all, not his silence, not his apparent rejection, and not even this barbed comment. She absorbs what he says and she interacts with it just pressing her point. She doesn't deny or take offense at his classification of her as a "dog" like the publican in Luke 18:13 who stood afar off and wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breasts saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

This woman is confessing her own uncleanness. She makes no self-defense, she's just pleading for mercy. And she seems to have had at least a rudimentary grasp of the doctrine of common grace. Jesus remember had brought up the doctrine of election, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the

House of Israel. They are the chosen people. They're God's elect." And she's not even stymied by that. In fact she seems to understand the principle of Psalm 145: 9, "That the Lord is good to all and his mercy is over all that he has made." That is the doctrine of common grace. God's mercies extend beyond the elect. There is no creature under heaven who hasn't benefited from God's mercy and he delights to show mercy and kindness and longsuffering.

Verse 16 of that same Psalm, Psalm 145, "You open your hand you satisfy the desire of every living thing." So she's basically saying, "Even if I'm not one of the chosen people I can still plead the mercy of God," which shows amazing faith on her part. This woman also knew Jesus' messianic title, maybe she knew other truths from the Old Testament as well like Psalm 86:5, "God is full of compassion and gracious, longsuffering, plenteous in mercy and truth." She's just hanging onto that promise of mercy.

I love the way she picks-up on the imagery Jesus uses. She paints a perfect word picture of the principle of common grace, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" and that analogy is loaded with significance.

We had a beagle for several years and he became a little lethargic in his old age, but there was one thing that always made him active. Whenever he heard someone preparing food in the kitchen he was there. You know he might have been upstairs asleep in a corner and I thought he was deaf because he didn't bark anymore when the doorbell rang, but if the refrigerator door opened he heard it and he'd be there in seconds always hoping for a scrap of something that might drop to the ground. He was better than a vacuum cleaner, he'd instantly dispose of any edible crumbs that fell to the ground and it didn't matter to him whether it was dessert or vegetables he was on it and it made him supremely happy. If he got a crumb of a stale Frito that just made his day you know?

That's the same spirit this woman is displaying, a scrap of divine grace is all she's asking for, surely this is not an unreasonable request. And in the final verse of our text Jesus responds by removing this mask of aloofness and it was a mask all along, he knew what he was doing, there was a strategy to this. John 2:25 says, "Jesus needed no one to bear witness about man for he himself knew what was in man." He knew this woman's heart. And in John 16:12 near the end of the upper room discourse Jesus tells his disciples, "I still have many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now." He clearly knew what this woman could bear and he simply took this opportunity to put her faith on display I think mainly for the instruction of the disciples and it's also recorded here for our benefit.

In the end you see after all that Jesus won't break the bruised reed, he doesn't quench the smoking flax, but this woman was no bruised reed. In fact Jesus pays her a profound compliment that have made even the leading figures among the 12 a little bit jealous. Remember that Jesus often chided them about the smallness of their faith. He would frequently say to them, "Oh you of little faith." He said just before he stilled the storm in Matthew 8, "Why are you afraid," he says, "oh you of little faith." He's speaking to the 12 there. He said in the chapter just before our text when you remember Peter starts walking on water and he begins to sink, Matthew 14:31. "Oh you of little faith why did you doubt?"

He'll say it again on chapter later after this encounter with the Canaanite woman when the disciples forget to bring to lunch and Jesus catches them discussing it among themselves saying, "We brought no bread," Matthew 16:8, "But Jesus aware of this said, 'Oh you of little faith why are you discussing amongst yourselves the fact that you have no bread?' " "Oh you of little faith why did you doubt?" That's what he says to his disciples.

By contrast this woman shows no doubt whatsoever. And Jesus answer in Matthew 15:28 is one of the most profound words of commendation he ever gave to anyone and he answers her prayer too. That Jesus answered her, "Oh woman great is your faith, be it done for you as you desire," and her daughter was healed instantly.

It's an amazing story isn't it? And she's an amazing woman. As far as we know from the biblical record she is the only person Jesus ministered to on this entire trip to the region of Tyre and Sidon, remember he was there to get rest and apparently he did. But in the eternal plan of God I think she was the real reason Jesus went there in the first place. The rest and refreshment those are temporal benefits. One believing soul like this is of eternal value. This story is a beautiful reminder that the good shepherd will always leave the 99 in the open country and go after the one who is lost until he finds it.

I find this woman admirable for at least three outstanding reasons. The thickness of her skin, the tenacity of her faith, and the persistence of her praying, those are rare qualities even in the church today. They were clearly unusual qualities in Jesus' time as well, she had an amazing capacity for doctrinal understanding and moral clarity as well. You see that in the fact that she's not stymied by the doctrine of election. She seems to grasp the principle of divine grace. Her theology is better than some Calvinists I know. She knew and affirmed truth whenever she heard, even those hard truths that seemed to put her in a difficult spot you never once hear her making any argument against the truth. She never tried to deny the inconvenient truth. She sees with the eyes of faith that God's mercy doesn't nullify his truth and vice versa.

She understood that divine delays are not the same as denial. And in short she laid hold of God's grace by faith and refused to let go. Her persistence was the proof of her faith. She's one of only two people ever that Jesus is recorded to have commended them for the greatness of their faith. Only twice did he say, "You have great faith," she's one of the, the other one a Gentile also, the Centurion whom we meet in Matthew 8 and in Luke 7 and there in Matthew 8:10, "Jesus says of the Centurion, 'I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such great faith.' "

I said at the start there's one thing in this story that I think is more amazing than the way Jesus treats this woman and that's what it is it's her faith. Her

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faith is truly amazing even Jesus is taken by it. She's a Gentile from a pagan land but faith like hers was rare even in Israel, even among the chosen people. That's one of the key lessons here. It's the reason frankly that Matthew who is writing for a Jewish audience makes this story so prominent. It's a rebuke to Israel, it's a rebuke to the people of God and that includes us. The whole account parallels in some ways the story of Elijah who you remember Elijah at one point sought refuge from Ahab in the attic of a woman who lived in this same region. Jesus makes that point in Luke 4: 25-27 he says, this, "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months and a great famine came over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

Here God chose this one, lone Canaanite woman to be the recipient of saving grace and healing for her daughter and she exhibits a degree of faith that's unheard of in all of Galilee and Judah. She stands as a rebuke to those multitudes in Israel who had such weak faith, she was a rebuke even to the disciples because their faith was comparatively small and fragile, oh they of little faith, but she's a rebuke to you and me as well, because of the ease with which we grow discouraged and stop praying even though we know God has promised to answer our prayers if we don't lose faith. She's a reminder of what it means to pray without ceasing. Our prayers, our prayers need to be like this, persistent and earnest and offered relentlessly with stubborn tenacity because that is the kind of faith that pleases God. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father again we pray that you would forgive us for our prayerlessness and for the fragility of our faith. Forgive us for doubting and for ceasing to pray. Hold us close even in those times when heaven seems silent and closed to our prayers. Keep us seeking you in faith. Our hearts echo the cry of that man in Mark 9:24 who said, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Give us the grace to lay hold of you with a tenacity that will keep us from falling, because we confess that on our own we will always fall and only you can keep us from falling. But you do promise more grace, give us

that grace. Multiple to us grace for the strengthening of our faith. We pray
in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Music]