

The Mom Who Refused to Take No for an Answer

Matthew 15:21-28

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This morning I want to look at a singular incident in the earthly life of Jesus: Matthew 15, starting in verse 21. Here we meet a 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 the girl. But in this instance, the Lord seems uncharacteristically aloof, abrupt—even apathetic about this poor woman's plight. 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 a famous messianic prophecy, quoted verbatim in 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 refers to the flax in a lamp when it's used up and burned out. You can always tell when a lamp-light is about to expire, because the wick starts

smoking and smoldering. You would normally snuff it out, refill the oil in the lamp, trim the burned portion of the wick away, or put in a whole new wick. A reed in Scripture is always a symbol of weakness. It was a hollow stalk from a grasslike plant that grows along the river bank. A reed is very weak and brittle. But you can whittle holes in a reed and make a little flute from it. Shepherds used these to calm the sheep. To this day, reeds are used to make the part of the mouthpiece in woodwind instruments. And they wear out easily when you use them. Clarinet reeds are sold in boxes of ten. Shepherds' flutes rarely lasted more than a day. And when they wear out, you simply snap them in two and get a new one.

So the point of this prophecy ("**a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench**") is to show the tender compassion of Christ. He always dealt with broken and used-up people not by discarding them but by healing them—by "**renew[ing] their strength; [so that] they [would] mount up with wings like eagles; they [could] run and not be weary; they [could] walk and not faint.**"

You see this, for example, when Jesus encounters a man who is totally insane, living naked in a graveyard, cutting himself with stones, because his mind and body

were possessed by a whole legion of demons. Jesus cast the demons into a herd of two thousand pigs, and in the very next scene we see that man delivered, **"sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind."**

That was the way of Jesus. Instead of rejecting or condemning severely 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 might be saved through him"** (John 3:17). **"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"** (Luke 19:10).

To Scribes and Pharisees and others **"who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt,"** Jesus frequently had very harsh and dismissive words. But to sinners who confessed their own guilt and sought freedom from sin's bondage and relief from sin's bitter consequences, Jesus always offered redemption. And He did it with such grace and compassion that His enemies scolded Him for being **"a friend of tax collectors and sinners."** It was an accusation He accepted gladly. He came, after all, **"to proclaim good news to the poor. . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, [and] to set at liberty those who are oppressed."**

When the Pharisees grumbled and challenged Jesus about being a dinner guest in the homes of notorious

sinners, Jesus said, **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."** And almost every time we see Jesus dealing with someone from far outside the circle of acceptable society, He is tender, compassionate, friendly, warm, and approachable. 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 we see Him turning away anyone who comes for help or healing.

Just a chapter before our text, in Matthew 14:34, we read that Jesus and His disciples **"came to 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 pressing 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 and healed them."** 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."** Matthew 12:15: **"Many followed him, and he healed them all."**

That was one of the unique and outstanding characteristics of Jesus' ministry. He simply did not turn people away. 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 heavy laden, and I will give you rest."** And, **"Whoever comes to me I will never cast out."**

So the vignette we're looking at today puts Jesus in a light we have never seen before—looking for all the world as if He is detached, distant, even derogatory toward this woman who comes seeking His help.

Here's the context: Jesus has just had a major public conflict with the Pharisees. These powerful religious leaders are following Him around Galilee, desperately seeking a reason to accuse Him. They keep condemning Him for not following their Sabbath rules and not observing the extrabiblical rules they have made for themselves regarding ceremonial cleanness. The previous chapter (Matthew 14) records the feeding of the five thousand. 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."** Nothing

there about any ceremonial washing. There weren't any wet-naps passed out with the food.

So at the start of Matthew 15, some **"Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus [all the way] from Jerusalem[. [This was an official delegation, most likely sent from the ruling council, 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.'"**

And at that point Jesus unleashes one of His angriest diatribes ever against the phony public self-righteousness of the Pharisees. In verse 14, for example, He says this about the Pharisees: **"Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."** He basically writes them off. **"Let them alone."** That's the biblical equivalent of, *"Forget them. Ignore them. they are headed for destruction."*

This is one of the earliest in a long series of public denunciations Jesus aims at the Pharisees. It's a consistent thread through the gospel of Matthew. That thread includes Jesus' words about the unpardonable sin in Matthew 12. You remember, I hope, that His warning about the unforgivable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was aimed at these phony religious leaders who fully understood that Jesus was the true Messiah, but they

rejected him anyway with such force and finality that they had already decided to put Him to death at the first opportunity.

Jesus' long war against Pharisaism will culminate in chapter 23,. That is a chapter-long jeremiad against the ruling religious elite, and it ends with this summary judgment in Matthew 23:38: "**Your house is left to you desolate.**"

From early adolescence (when he got separated from His earthly parents in Jerusalem) until decisive moment at the end of Matthew 23, Jesus had always referred to the Temple as "**My Father's house:**" "**Do not make my Father's house a house of trade.**" Now, suddenly, speaking to the Pharisees, He calls it "**your house.**"

"**Your house is left to you desolate.**" Jesus then departed from the Temple for the last time, leaving it devoid of all heavenly glory, bereft of any divine presence—spiritually desolate. And then within a generation, the Temple was utterly destroyed by the Roman army, and it has never been rebuilt, to this very day.

It's clear that these interactions with the Pharisees troubled and exhausted Jesus. He was truly human, and in His humanity, He fully experienced all the normal, non-sinful weaknesses of human flesh. Hebrews 4:15:

"We have not [a] high priest [who] cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities." He grew weary, got thirsty, became hungry, felt the depths of sadness, and the cares of earthly life just like you and I do. And He needed rest just like you and I do. Run-ins like this with the Pharisees left Him mentally, emotionally, and physically spent.

We know that, because on several occasions He took time off from public ministry—or tried to. In Mark 6:31, for example, He says to the disciples, **"Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while."** For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. **And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves."**

But look what happened (verse 33): **"Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things."**

Something similar happens in Mark 1, after Jesus heals a leper. He tells the man, **"See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them."** But the very next verse says 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 was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter." Even in the most desolate places, Jesus could not get any rest. Multitudes followed Him everywhere, making it impossible for Him to take time off from public ministry.

So here in Matthew 15, after that run-in with these Pharisees who came all the way from Jerusalem to oppose Him, Jesus quietly withdraws with the disciples to a place near the coast of the Mediterranean, outside the boundaries of Israel. Matthew 5:21: "**And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.**" That's north of Israel, in a region that today is part of Lebanon. 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 He faced everywhere He went in Israel.

This was all very secretive. By now Jesus was desperate to get some time away, so He probably traveled with just a handful of His closest, most trustworthy disciples under cover of night. And he managed to arrive in the region of Tyre and Sidon without any crowds following. He wasn't there to preach or do any kind of ministry; He was there to rest and recover strength so that He *could* minister more effectively. (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.) The parallel passage in Mark 7:24 says this: "**He entered a house and did not want anyone to know, 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 was not a large multitude. It was one very noisy and persistent woman. She shows up and interrupts Jesus' R&R. She is a mom, with a severely afflicted daughter, 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, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.'**" The verb tense means she was persistently, unceasingly pleading for Jesus' help.

Now, bear in mind that Jesus is secluded in a house, trying to get some sleep, no doubt spending time alone in prayer (as was His custom), needing to recharge His energy so that He would have the strength to face everything He knew lay ahead. This time of rest was long overdue. His heart was burdened and heavy. He had just

emerged from this exhausting conflict with that powerful group of Pharisees. And while he secluded himself in a house, the disciples were apparently standing guard, to make sure nothing and no one interrupted Jesus' rest. But this one woman simply refused to take no for an answer, and she simply would not go away.

Notice, even though she calls Jesus by a distinctly Jewish title ("O Lord, Son of David,") she was "**a Canaanite woman from that region.**" That's how the Jews of Jesus' day would have referred to a Phoenician woman. The early Canaanites, of course, were the Old Testament people who were driven from the Promised Land because of their extreme wickedness. By Jesus' time, the descendants of the Canaanite tribes were a culture of merchants and seafarers. They were Gentiles not known for being religious. The Jews considered them unclean, and the fact that they called them "Canaanites" expressed a measure of contempt. This was simply not a region where the typical Jewish religious leader would take his disciples for a vacation. But that made it a place where Jesus might go to get away for a time from the incessant conflicts with the Pharisees and the pressing demands from crowds of curious and needy people who followed

him everywhere. Here, at least He could have some peace and quiet.

Or so it seemed, until this woman showed up.

She was continually "**crying**," and the word in the Greek text means "to cry out." She may have been weeping as well, but the stress here is on the volume, not the tears. She is shouting to Jesus at a volume intended to penetrate the walls of the house. It was the kind of howling, high-volume shriek that is hard to hear and grates on your nerves. And although the disciples were apparently tasked with guarding Jesus' solitude, they finally interrupted to beg Him to respond to this woman. Verse 23: "**And his disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying out after us.'**"

Jesus' response—including His initial lack of any response whatsoever—is what might strike you as most remarkable about this scene. Yet there's something even more remarkable here, and that's what I want you to see. But first, we need to work our way through the narrative.

There are three stages in Jesus' dealing with this woman, and all three show us Jesus in a totally uncharacteristic light. Follow with me as we work our way through this text, and let's consider each stage in Jesus' shocking interaction with this woman.

1. STAGE ONE: HE SEEMS TO DISREGARD HER

Jesus' initial response to this woman's pleas is total silence. Verse 23: **"But he did not answer her a word."**

Augustine famously says of this text, *"He who was the Word spoke not a word."*

The only other time we find Jesus refusing to answer is when he is put on trial. Matthew 27:12-14:

But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer.

13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?"

14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge.

At least seven times Scripture tells us that when He was charged by those who finally crucified Him, **"he opened not his mouth."** But whenever needy people sought relief or healing, no one was more responsive than Jesus. This is the only time we are ever told that anyone's pleas for deliverance were met with silence.

And yet, this is a more common experience than we might deduce from the gospel narratives, isn't it? For reasons that we know are good and gracious, God sometimes delays His answers to our prayers. Jesus Himself taught that although God always hears and

answers our prayers, we need to be persistent in praying. He told parable in Luke 11:5-9 to illustrate that very point:

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';

7 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'?

8 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.

9 And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Keep asking, and seeking, and knocking, even if the answer doesn't come immediately. There's another parable in Luke 18:1-5 with a similar lesson. Mark your place here in Matthew 15, and let's look at this passage together. Luke 18. Verse 2:

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.

3 And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'

4 For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"

The lesson, as Jesus goes on to give it, is that God is *not* like that unjust judge. He answers not merely because we persist, but because He loves both justice and mercy. He is eager to answer. Here's the postscript to the parable of the unjust judge. Jesus says (verses 6-8),

Hear what the unrighteous judge says.

7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

And yet, despite this reassurance of God's willingness to answer our prayers *speedily*, it does seem to us sometimes as if our prayers are met with silence. You see an example of this in the experience of Elijah. In the contest with the Baal-priests, when he prayed for fire from above, the answer came immediately. Yet later that same day, when he prayed for rain to break the drought, he repeated the prayer six times before he saw any

answer at all. Furthermore, the seventh time he prayed, the only sign that God had heard his prayer came in the form of a tiny cloud the shape and size of a man's hand.

God's timing sometimes seems slow to us. Remember, according to 2 Peter 3:8, "**a thousand years [is to the Lord] as one day.**" And Ecclesiastes 3:11 says "**[God makes] every thing beautiful in his time.**" His timing is always perfect, but to us the answers can seem awfully slow in coming. It sometimes feels like the Lord is responding to us with cold silence, when in fact He is simply awaiting the perfect time. We are prone to get impatient and frustrated, and Jesus knew that.

What's the proper response? Same as Elijah. Keep praying. The Lord loves faith that perseveres. He *wants* us to be persistent. In fact, look once more at this parable Jesus told about widow who pestered the unjust judge. We saw at the end of the parable, how Jesus reminds His disciples that God is nothing like this selfish magistrate; He delights to answer our prayers speedily. Usually the last line of any parable will give you the best clue about its central lesson.

That's not the case here. The main lesson of this story is given in verse 1: "**He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.**" The parable

is an encouragement to be persistent in prayer. The old term for this is *importunity*. To be importunate means to be persistently demanding. That's the dictionary definition. Keep asking—and the implication is that when the answer is delayed, we should repeat our requests with increasing urgency. *Importunity* in prayer is commended in Scripture. When it seems like God is ignoring our pleas, we the right response is importunity rather than impatience. *Keep asking*.

That's exactly what the desperate mother in our text did—so much that it grated on the ears of the disciples. Back to Matthew 15. Verse 22. She kept crying out, **"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word.** The longer Jesus stays silent, the more shrill her repeated pleas began to sound. That motivated the disciples to intercede on her behalf (not necessarily out of compassion but mainly to get rid of the annoyance). Second half of verse 23: **"His disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying out after us.'"** So now *they* are 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 was what

they wanted. They were probably thinking much like the unrighteous judge in that parable: *Give her what she wants—if for no other reason, just to shut her up.* Only Jesus could give what she wanted, so the disciples took the case to Him.

In effect, their prayers—their earnest pleas to Christ for peace and quiet—join in agreement with her prayers for mercy. Now it's a group petition. And amazingly, Jesus *still* does not respond with an immediate *yes*. That brings us to the next stage of this drama. Stage one: he seems to disregard her.

2. STAGE TWO: HE SEEMS TO *DISCOURAGE* HER

Jesus' reply to the disciples' request is even more stunning and unexpected than his silence in the face of the woman's pleading. 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, what Jesus said was perfectly true. His primary mission was to the nation of Israel. He had come as their promised Messiah. 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." He was coming as Israel's king, 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.

Romans 1:16: "**The gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first.**" And Jesus was still in that phase of His ministry, announcing the kingdom to Israel. So Jesus was speaking truthfully here. This was not a gratuitous insult, but an honest declaration about what He was called to do.

Still, it's not a truth suited to encourage this woman. Spurgeon says Jesus "announce[d] to her a fact which could not possibly assist or strengthen her faith." Specifically, he brought up the subject of election. More on that later.

But I love this: that statement from Jesus—*which probably would have come across as a snub or a cold shoulder to the average person*—did not faze this woman at all. The typical person might have turned away or replied with coarse words and angry accusations. She saw it as an open door.

Perhaps it was *literally* an open door. The disciples probably had to open the door to the place of seclusion in

order to receive Jesus' answer to their message. She ignores the message and seems to push past the disciples who were acting as Jesus' bodyguards—right into the house where Jesus was. She falls at Jesus' feet. Verse 25: **"But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'"**

It's the same plea she has been making, now abbreviated into the fewest possible words: **"Lord, help me."** The scene is full of pathos. Unless you are totally inhuman, there's no way to picture this in your mind without feeling profound empathy for this poor woman.

And although Jesus is God, He was not inhuman. He was a *perfect* human—a thousand times more tender-hearted and empathetic than anyone you have ever known. And you see this clearly every other time in Scripture when anyone falls at His feet. Even in Luke 7, when a woman of ill repute anoints His feet and has nothing but her hair to wipe them with, the Pharisees were disgusted. But Jesus showed her the ultimate compassion. He forgave her sin completely, to the chagrin of those self-righteous Pharisees.

Then just one chapter later, Luke 8:41, Jairus falls at Jesus' feet and implores him to come heal his dying daughter. Jesus responds immediately. And while He is

on the way to Jairus's house, a woman who had been ceremonially unclean for twelve long years touched the hem of His garment. Any Pharisee would have cursed and condemned her for what they deemed to be a defiling touch. But Scripture says, **"When the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed."**

Jesus' response to that woman was immediate, and tender-hearted: **"Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."**

In Luke 10, Jesus commends Mary for sitting at His feet when Martha wanted Him to scold her for not doing her part to serve. In short, Jesus never rebuffed anyone who fell at his feet.

Except here.

Now we reach stage three, and this is the most shocking part of this surprising drama. To review: Stage one—He seems to disregard her. Stage two: He seems to discourage her. Now—

3. STAGE THREE: HE SEEMS TO DISRESPECT HER

When the 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 toward this poor woman. His first response is cold silence. Then He gives her a cold shoulder. Now He responds with a cold putdown—or so it appears. Verse 26: "**And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'**"

Dogs, of course, were considered unclean animals. In Old Testament times, no one would have a pet dog. By the first century, dogs had been domesticated, and Romans often kept them as pets. I've seen a mosaic in the floor of a home uncovered when Pompeii was dug out of the volcanic ash. It's a picture of a dog on a leash with the words "*cave canem*"—Latin for "Beware the Dog." Similar warning signs, I understand, were common in Pompeii. There are also plaster casts of dogs that died in the disaster, and you can still see that the dogs had collars, indicating they were household pets.

One other point here: When Jesus answers this woman, he uses the diminutive form of the Greek word for "dogs." It communicates the idea of small dogs—lap

dogs; pet dogs. That mitigates the insult somewhat, but most people would still say it's not politically correct to compare a desperate woman to a dog.

In fact, there are those who would make this a point of major controversy. I found an article about this passage from August 2011 in that bastion of political correctness, *The Huffington Post*. The article is written by a woman whose bio says she is an ordained Lutheran minister, and she basically treats Jesus as an unenlightened bigot. In her account, the woman is the teacher and the hero of the story. In the end, she says, "*Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and in the face of the Canaanite woman.*" She claims Jesus was forever changed by this encounter. She actually uses these words: "*Jesus finally heard and came to believe.*" It's one of the worst pieces of Bible butchery I have ever encountered from someone who claims to be a minister. If you can read Matthew's gospel and come to that conclusion, your reading comprehension skills are pathetic.

It's true that likening her to a dog comes across as an insult. But notice that the Canaanite woman herself didn't take it that way at all. She doesn't argue the point, become indignant, or even disagree with the

characterization. In fact, she affirms it! She agrees with Jesus.

I love how the King James Version translates her reply. Verse 27: **"And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."** She affirms what he just said: **"Truth, Lord."** Here's an example of why I don't particularly like the NIV. They make it sound as if she is disagreeing with Jesus. Here's the NIV (verses 26-27: **"[Jesus] replied, 'It is 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 fall from their master's table.'"** They make it sound like she contradicts Him.

That's not how the 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 affirmed the truth of what He said: **"Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."** Or, as the ESV has it: **"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."** There is a confession of faith implied in her words. Jesus called her a dog, and she barks in agreement!

This is an amazing exchange! She doesn't argue or contradict Him; she simply keeps pressing her case. Nothing he has said or done can deter her. Not his

silence; not His apparent rejection; not even this barbed comment. She absorbs what he says and interacts with it, pressing the 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] far off [and] would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'**" This woman is confessing her own uncleanness. She makes no self-defense. She just pleads for mercy.

She seems to have at least a rudimentary grasp of common grace. Jesus 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.*

She wasn't even stymied by that. In fact, she seemed to understand the principle of Psalm 145:9: "**The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.**" That's the doctrine of common grace. God's mercies extend beyond the elect. There is no creature under heaven that has not benefitted from the mercy, kindness, and longsuffering of God. Verse 16 of that same psalm (145): "**You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.**" If she wasn't one of the chosen people, she could still plead the mercy of God. That shows amazing faith on her part.

This woman also knew Jesus' messianic title. Perhaps she knew other truths from the Old Testament as well. Like Psalm 86:5: "**God [is] full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.**"

And I love the way she picks up on Jesus' imagery. She paints a perfect word-picture of the principle of common grace: "**Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.**" A scrap of divine grace was all she wanted. Surely this was no unreasonable request.

And in the final verse of our text, Jesus responds by removing the mask of aloofness. It *was* a mask all along. He knew what He was doing, and there was a strategy to it.

John 2:25 says Jesus "**needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.**" 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.**" So He clearly knew what this woman could bear, and He simply took this opportunity to put faith on display, mainly, I think, for the instruction of the disciples. And it's recorded here for *our* benefit.

So we see, after all, that Jesus won't break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. This woman was no bruised reed.

In fact, Jesus pays her a profound compliment that might have made even the leading figures among the Twelve a little bit jealous. Remember that Jesus often chided them about the smallness of their faith. He would frequently say to them, "**O ye of little faith.**" He said it just before he stilled the storm in Matthew 8: "**Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?**" He said it in the chapter before our text, when Peter began to walk on water but started sinking—Matthew 14:31: "**O you of little faith, why did you doubt?**" He'll say it again one chapter after this encounter with the Canaanite woman, when the disciples forgot to bring lunch and Jesus catches them "**discussing it among themselves, saying, 'We brought no bread.'**" Matthew 16:8: "**But Jesus, aware of this, said, 'O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?'**"

"**O you of little faith, why did you doubt?**" That's what he says to His leading 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 anyone. He answers her

prayer, too: **"Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly."**

This is an amazing story, and she is an amazing woman. As far as we know from the biblical record, she is the only person Jesus ministered to on this trip to the region of Tyre and Sidon. In the eternal plan of God, she was the real reason Jesus went there in the first place. The rest and refreshment were merely temporal benefits. One believing soul is of eternal value. And this story is a beautiful reminder that the good shepherd will always **"leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it."**

I find this woman admirable for three outstanding reasons: *The thickness of her skin.* The tenacity of her faith. And the persistence of her praying. These are rare qualities in the church, even 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 wasn't stymied by the doctrine of election. She seemed to grasp the principle of divine grace. She knew and affirmed truth when she heard it—even those hard truths that seemed to put her in a

difficult spot. We never once hear her try to make any argument against the truth—trying to deny the inconvenient truths. She saw 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.

In short, she laid hold of God's grace by faith and refused to let go. Her persistence was proof of her faith. She's one of only two people whom Jesus commended for the greatness of their faith. The other was a Gentile as well—the centurion whom we meet in Matthew 8 and Luke 7. There, in Matthew 8:10, Jesus says of the centurion, **"Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."**

I said at the start that there's one thing in this story that is much more amazing than the way Jesus treats this woman. Her faith is what's truly amazing. She is a Gentile from a pagan land. But faith like hers was rare, even in Israel, among the chosen people. That's one of the key lessons here, and it's and the reason Matthew, writing for a Jewish audience, makes this story so prominent.

The whole account parallels in many ways the story of Elijah, who 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:

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, 26 and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.

27 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 lone Canaanite woman to be the recipient of saving grace, and she exhibited a degree of faith that was unheard of in Galilee and Judah. She stands as a rebuke to the multitudes in Israel who had such weak faith. She is a rebuke even to the disciples, because their faith was comparatively small and fragile.

She is 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 if we don't lose faith. She's a reminder that we should pray without ceasing. Our prayers should be persistent, and earnest, and offered relentlessly, with stubborn tenacity, because that is the kind of faith that pleases God.