

Persevering Faith Continues Hard After Christ Despite Many Hindrances and Trials

Matthew 15:21-28

July 15, 2012

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Oh, the blessing of believing parents! For God has ordained that through believing parents the promises of the Covenant of Grace should be extended to our children. Listen to the promise of the Lord that is found in Genesis 17:7: “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” And to confirm and signify those covenant promises made to Abraham and his children in their generations, the Lord gave to Abraham and to his seed the outward sign of circumcision (Genesis 17:10). The outward sign of circumcision pointed to the need of an inward circumcision of the heart (a cutting away of sin), which only the Lord could accomplish by His saving grace (Deuteronomy 30:6). Circumcision was not intended by God to be a lucky rabbit’s foot in which believing parents were to hope, thinking that nothing more need be done for the covenant child. To the contrary, believing parents (like Abraham) were to raise their children up in the good news of God’s covenant salvation by way of the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Genesis 18:19). Believing parents (like Abraham) were always to lead their children to cast themselves upon the righteousness and faithfulness of their covenant-keeping God for their salvation.

This was the blessed and loving duty given to believing parents in the Old Covenant, and it is the same for believing parents in the New Covenant (when it comes to bringing our children to be baptized, which points our children to their need of a spiritual cleansing from sin, and to the promise

of the Lord made to them in their baptism that He will cleanse all from sin who come to Him by faith alone). Believing parents in the New Covenant (like Abraham in the Old Covenant) were to raise their children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). This was the way in which Timothy was raised by his mother, Eunice, and by his grandmother, Lois, from the time that he was very small (2 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 3:15).

Dear covenant children (whether older or younger) who are within the sound of my voice, you are most blessed because the Lord has given you believing parents. You are in covenant with the Lord of salvation and have His promises extended to you, because you are the seed (or children) of believing parents. That is not a reason for you to think that now your salvation is secure. For the same gospel promises were made to a whole generation of Israelites who wandered in the wilderness, but because they did not believe the promises of the Lord that were extended to them and made to them in the gospel and in the covenant sign and seal of circumcision (just as you have heard the gospel many times over and have received the covenant sign and seal of baptism), they neglected the salvation offered to them and fell under God's judgment (Hebrews 4:1-2; Hebrews 2:3-4). Dear children, give praise to the Lord for your believing parents. They are not perfect (as you know), but by God's grace you have received the covenant sign of baptism and are being led to Jesus Christ through the instruction, discipline, and loving nurture of your believing parents.

This Lord's Day, let us consider a believing mother who was mightily used as the means by which the Lord brought a great deliverance and blessing to her daughter. The main points from our text are these: (1) True Faith

Knows No Geographical Boundaries (Matthew 15:21-22a); (2) True Faith Continues To Look To The Mercy Of Christ (Matthew 15:22b-28).

I. True Faith Knows No Geographical Or Ethnic Boundaries (Matthew 15:21-22a).

A. After the Lord had discoursed with the Pharisees concerning the effect that human tradition had in making void the worship and commandments of God (in Matthew 15:1-9), and had from there addressed the multitudes concerning the real matter of sinful defilement—namely, sin originates from within the heart of man, and not from the food that one eats or how one eats it (in Matthew 15:10-20), Jesus heads north to the regions that lay beyond Palestine near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. The ancient seaports of Tyre and Sidon were at the time of Christ within the geographical jurisdiction of Syria, or what is today Lebanon.

B. Why did Christ depart from Israel to this region of Gentiles?

1. **From a human perspective**, our text does not seem to indicate that Christ came to the region of Tyre and Sidon in order to preach and teach the multitudes, for it states in the parallel passage (in Mark 7:24) that He “entered into a house, and would have no man know it: but he could not be hid.” From a human perspective, perhaps Christ departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon in order to temporarily escape the presence of the Pharisees whose hostility toward Him was moving from simmer to boil; or perhaps to remove himself temporarily from the pursuit of the multitudes who increasingly had expressed their desire to establish Him as a civil king upon the throne in Jerusalem; or perhaps to find a place of rest where He might replenish His physical strength. Although any or all of these reasons might have occasioned Christ’s

arrival in the region of Tyre and Sidon, I would submit that there is a more significant reason.

2. **From a Divine perspective**, Christ departed to this Gentile area in order to make clear to all that the gift of salvation was not only for the Jew who was descended from the physical stock of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also for the Gentile who had no physical relationship to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, this account is a preview (if you will) of God’s rich mercy in Christ being poured forth upon the Gentiles of not only Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon, but upon all nations of the earth (a fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, namely, that Abraham would be the father of many nations, the father of all that believe, and that in his seed—namely, Christ—all the nations of the earth would be blessed).

D. Consider with me the description of this woman in Matthew 15:22a.

1. Her nationality. “And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts.” Mark’s gospel (Mark 7:26) describes this woman as follows: “The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation.” When referring to this woman as a “Greek”, the Holy Spirit uses a word which came to be synonymous with one who was not a Jew, but was a Gentile (cf. Romans 1:16; Romans 2:9-11,14). More specifically, her nationality is identified as a “Syrophenician” (since at that time Tyre and Sidon were within the Roman province of Syria, or what was in ancient times called Phoenicia). Our text in Matthew 15:22 describes her as “a woman of Canaan” (i.e. she was a descendant of one of the heathen, God-hating tribes that had inhabited Canaan at the time that God brought Israel into the land of Canaan under Joshua).

a. Here is one who nationally and ethnically had no claim upon Israel’s God or Israel’s Messiah, and yet she is graciously brought into covenant with the Lord. She embodies the story of your life and mine

as undeserving Gentiles who have been saved by the grace of Christ. The inclusion of this account about a Gentile woman within the gospel that was circulated throughout the world was intended by the Holy Spirit to declare to Gentiles throughout the Roman empire that Jesus was the friend of sinners (whether Jew or Gentile).

b. This account is reminiscent of Christ's sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:25-27). In that sermon, the Lord demonstrated that the God's grace was not confined to Jews, but was extended to those of other nations (to the Jew first, but, also to the Gentile). For the Jesus declared in His sermon that there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah, but the Lord sent Elijah to care for one widow (not in Israel, but rather in a city of Sidon, Serapta). And if that was not a blow to the national pride of the Nazarites to whom Christ preached, He went on to say that there were many lepers in Israel, but the Lord sent His prophet, Elisha, to heal one leper in particular, a Syrian captain, by the name of Naaman. Here is a contrast that we see between the mere outward form of faith and religion of the Nazarites and an inward reality of faith and religion of this believing mother who came to Christ pleading for His mercy to be given to her daughter.

c. There is something to be applied to our lives here as well. The Jews were broken off as branches from their own olive tree due to their unbelief, their pride, and their hypocrisy. We too may fall under the same judgment of God if we follow in their footsteps. If our religion becomes cold, formal, and self-righteous, we will find ourselves outside looking in. If our Confession, our Covenants, our outward forms of worship, or our heritage replace the Gospel and our fervor and love for Jesus Christ and His commandments, we will be cut off like the Jews of old (Romans 11:16-24; John 15:2; Matthew 21:43; Hebrews 6 and 10). "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"

(1 Corinthians 10:12). We stand by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. If we lose our first love, or if our religion becomes merely external, Christ will come and remove us as a faithful light amongst His Churches. We are all expendable within Christ's Kingdom. Only Christ and His truth are not expendable. Let us therefore, forsake all pride and reach out to all peoples, tongues, and nations with the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ (beginning with those who are within our own families and circle of friends).

2. The second descriptive item about this woman is not found in the Matthew account, but is rather found in the Mark account. We read that she had heard from others the good news of Christ and His power to heal the sick, save the lost, and set the captive free (Mark 7:25; cf. Mark 3:7-8). Having heard from others the gospel of Christ, she had come to believe with a true faith that Jesus was the promised Messiah, for she cries out to Christ with these words of faith: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David" Matthew 15:22. With a conviction firmly settled in her mind that Christ was the Lord and the Messianic Son of David who was prophesied to come (to not only Israel, but, to the Gentile nations as well) she seeks Him out from where He was privately staying for the sake of her demonized daughter. How she was able to find Christ, we do not know. However, a persevering faith will always find the Lord, even when it seems He has hid Himself from us for the time being. A persevering faith will not give up until the Lord in all His power, righteousness, and mercy is found ("And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart" Jeremiah 29:13). Ultimately, there are no obstacles that can keep a persevering faith from finding the mercy and the power of Christ.

II. True Faith Continues To Look To The Mercy Of Christ (Matthew 15:22b-28).

A. Let us now consider the potential roadblocks to this believing mother's faith, and how God ordinarily uses the faith, instruction, and practice of believing parents to be the ordinary means of salvation to their children. In order to get the whole picture, let us merge both accounts of this woman from our text in Matthew 15 and in the parallel account found in Mark 7.

1. **The first potential roadblock** presented to this mother's faith is that having heard from others of Christ's mercy to save from sin and to heal the afflicted, and now having searched for Him and found Him, "she besought him that he would cast forth the devil (literally "demon") out of her daughter" (Mark 7:26). Quite literally, "she was continually or repeatedly asking him that He would cast forth the devil out of her daughter." This manifests the persistency of faith—it does not give up (Luke 18:1). But according to Matthew 15:23, "he answered her not a word." The Lord Jesus acted as though he did not even hear her. Here her faith was first tried.

a. Can you imagine yourself in that position? You know that the Lord has miraculously healed multitudes from the reports of others who have shared the good news with you, and perhaps these very ones who gave you the good news of Christ had been healed themselves by Him. You have come to believe that He is the Savior, not only of believing Jews, but of believing Gentiles as well. You have searched for Him out of utter desperation for the very life of your child, and having found Him, you repeatedly plead with Him to have mercy upon you—and He seems to completely ignore you. He seems to turn a deaf ear to your repeated cries for help. Is that a roadblock or deterrent to persevering faith? No way. At most, it is simply a challenge that must be overcome.

b. Now the Lord is not really being harsh as it might appear. He is simply testing the quality of her faith—both for her good

and for the good of all who would read this account or hear this account preached. There is a parallel in the way that Joseph relates to his brethren in Egypt, and the way in which Christ relates to this woman. Behind the stern face is a loving, compassionate heart praying that this mother's faith will not fail, and anticipating the moment when the gracious countenance of the Lord might be truly revealed. What I want you to see is that Christ's silence did not discourage this mother from continuing to cry out to Christ for His mercy, on behalf of her needy daughter.

2. **The second potential roadblock** that confronted this dear believing mother is found in Matthew 15:23 ("And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us."). The disciples were repeatedly asking the Lord to send her away. It is the same word and tense ("besought") as is used of the woman in Mark 7:26 ("and she besought him that he would cast forth the devil out of her daughter.").

a. What a scene! The mother in faith is repeatedly pleading with the Lord to have mercy upon her (for the sake of her daughter), and the disciples are repeatedly pleading with the Lord to send her away because she is making a spectacle of herself (in their opinion). Here are those disciples who are nearest to the Lord, the commissioned officers of the Lord, beseeching Him to send her away. Without a persevering faith, she would have been tempted to say, "What chance have I to obtain the Lord's help for my daughter when even His own apostles are asking Him to send me away? Surely He will hear them and not me." But persevering faith in Jesus Christ is not hindered by the sins and faults of others (even sins and faults of ministers and elders). If it is true and right, it does not matter that I am discouraged by others from doing what is agreeable to the will of God (whether by a spouse, by a parent, by a child, by a sibling, by a friend, by an employer, or by a

Congress, president, or supreme court). Persevering faith keeps its eye upon the Lord and His promises, and waits with hope to see the work of Christ performed.

b. Just as the disciples sought to prevent and discourage parents from bringing their little children to Christ in order to be blessed by Him (Matthew 19:14), so they sought here to prevent this mother from seeking a blessing from Christ for her little daughter. After all, the Lord had come to rest and to get away from the multitudes. He didn't need this woman to bother Him with her needy child. The disciples seemed to misunderstand the place that children have in the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:1-6). What a warning to us as ministers and elders that we not hinder anyone by word or deed from laying hold of the truth and mercy of Christ (not even little children). The same applies to parents and to us all.

3. **The third potential roadblock** comes when the Lord finally breaks His silence (Matthew 15:24): "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." What Jesus is now saying is this: "I have been sent first to invite the Jews to the wedding feast. I have not come first to minister to you Gentiles. There is an order to My ministry. The covenant people of God (Israel) are to be called first." But because He does not mention anything concerning the Gentiles, it could have left the distinct impression that she was excluded from His mercy (at least for the present time). But the persevering faith of this believing mother drove her to the Lord and not away from the Lord, for she came "and worshiped him, saying, Lord help me" (Matthew 15:25).

a. How many would have fled away from Christ at that point as fast as they could run? But that is not what a persevering faith does.

b. Dear ones, the truth of Christ at times is very hard to swallow. God's delays in coming to our help are physically, emotionally,

and spiritually unbearable to us (or so it seems to us). Resting with perseverance in Christ (and in even the truth of Christ that is most despised by the world or by fellow Christians today) calls us to do things that we find very uncomfortable and even impossible to do (such as picking up our cross, denying ourselves and following Him, such as keeping His commandments out of love for Christ even when it is difficult and no one stands with us, and such as loving Christ more than any loved one upon the earth). However, persevering faith does not flee from following Christ when the truth is hard to swallow. It falls at the feet of Christ in loving and humble submission to His authority and pleads for His mercy to be faithful.

4. **The fourth potential roadblock** is found in Mark 7:27: “But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it unto the dogs.” The Lord Jesus compares this Gentile woman to a filthy dog. The Gentiles were often likened to filthy dogs by the Jews, much like they were also likened to unclean swine. Jesus here acknowledges that the children (i.e. Israel) are first entitled to eat to their fill of the blessings of God’s salvation. Thus, it is not fitting at the present time to take the spiritual feast which God prepared for Israel (the children) and to give it to the Gentile dogs.

a. Here the Lord confronts this woman with her own unworthiness to receive of the blessings of salvation. There is a very real sense that we all must be smitten with that truth before we can ever enjoy the blessings of salvation.

b. Her response in Mark 7:28 is one of acknowledging that she is an undeserving dog, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table: “And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children’s crumbs.” Persevering faith is not turned away from Christ by the revelation of one’s sin and unworthiness, but rather driven to plead for even the crumbs of God’s

mercy. Are you content and thankful to receive even what seems to be the crumbs of the Lord in your present isolated circumstances (even if there is presently no covenanted ministers, elders, or churches in your area? Are you thankful for the crumbs of God's mercy even though many obstacles seem to be cast into your way in following Christ? Are you thankful for the crumbs of God's mercy even though there is hostility to your faith and practice of Christ's gospel and truth within your own family? This believing mother was ready to receive whatever crumbs of mercy might fall from the table of God's salvation.

B. The persevering faith of this woman is rewarded by the Lord with the mercy which she sought from Him. The seeming harshness of the Lord turns into the compassionate smile of the Lord as He pronounces that her daughter is healed (in Matthew 15:28): "O woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour." This woman did not believe that the Lord had to lay His hand upon her daughter, but believed He merely needed to speak the word and it would be done. Dear ones, Christ delights to reward persevering faith with the mercy that is sought.

C. In conclusion, I would have you note the truth that Christ hears the prayers of faithful parents (and particularly in this account, He hears the prayers of faithful mothers) who cry out to him on behalf of their children. Let us persevere in faith not only on behalf of our own salvation, but let us also persevere in pleading for His blessings upon our children and grandchildren—the very promises of blessing made to them in their baptism.