

Introduction

I know I talk a lot about my grandson Titus. But there is another member of the extended family that does not get much mention. In fact you may not know that I not only have a grandson but also a grand dog. Rosie is a golden retriever, Labrador mix. Philip and Ellie have had her for a little over a year now. She is a pretty dog and very smart. Like most house dogs, Rosie loves to eat food that falls from the table. And when Titus is eating, there can be a considerable amount of food that falls to the floor. So whenever Titus is seated in his chair, Rosie readies herself. She watches expectantly, longingly, and when the food falls she springs forward and gobbles it up.

The same thing happened in the days of Jesus' time on earth. A desperate woman makes mention of it in an astonishing encounter with Jesus. We find it in our text for the morning.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

This text presents for us a drama that reverberates with astonishment. I count four main sections in the drama, and each one involves a remarkable occurrence. Together these occurrences speak strongly to us about how to deal with desperation, how to look at ourselves, and what hope there is for help.

In the first section ...

I. A Woman Desperately Seeks for Mercy.

A. This woman came out crying. The particular Greek word used to communicate her cry has particular reference to an intense kind of cry. Here was a wail, a cry of such a nature that her distress was felt by all those around. And she had reason for distress. Her daughter was oppressed by a demon. Here was a condition that was destroying her daughter, and there was nothing she could do. Every parent knows what it means to feel the angst of seeing your child suffer and being unable to make them well. Many parents know the sorrow of seeing their children

destroy themselves and being unable to stop them. And yet this daughter was demonized. What was a mother to do? No doubt she had sought help from those around her, but none could help. She was desperate. So she cried. She wailed. She mournfully petitioned Jesus for help.

B. The fact that a woman with a demonized child was desperate and cried out to Jesus for help is moving, but in itself it is not incredibly unusual. Other parents in Jesus' day sought similar help from Jesus. But there are several aspects of her cry that are quite remarkable.

The first is location. Jesus had just experienced a massive turning away of people who had identified themselves as his followers. And then the higher-ups from among the Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes had appeared and exerted themselves to find fault with Jesus, but he had exposed their hypocrisy. It was time for a side-trip. Jesus left Israelite territory and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon some 30 or 40 miles from Galilee. The thing you need to know about the district of Tyre and Sidon is that it was a dark, dark place, basically comparable to the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact in the Old Testament in the prophecies of Ezekiel, the king of Tyre is presented as Satan himself.

This is where this woman lived. This was her home. Apart from someone coming for her, she was without hope and without God in the world. There are places like this that remain in our world today. People there are lost in the darkest darkness, and they do not even have an outpost of the church in their land. Their only hope is that gospel preachers will leave their comfort zones and go to them with the good news.

The second remarkable aspect about this woman is identification. Matthew identifies her as a Canaanite woman. She was a Gentile, but even worse she was a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the wicked inhabitants of the land to which God brought Israel in conquest. God was driving them out because of their many detestable abominations, including child sacrifice. He had commanded Israel to eliminate all life, to save alive nothing that breathes (Dt. 20:16) in the land of Canaan for all the abominable practices that had done for their gods. Israel failed to do what God said. And this woman is evidence. But this is her identity; she is a Canaanite, so evil is

her heritage that God commanded his people to wipe them out completely. She is one that got away. She epitomizes a dark person descending from a line of dark ancestors and living among a dark and sinful people.

But here is a third remarkable aspect of what Matthew says about her. It may not seem that striking at first. It is bound up in two basic English words. The Canaanite woman from that region CAME OUT. In the original these are not two words but one. It is one consolidated idea of emerging out of one thing into another. God sent Moses to Egypt to LEAD OUT the Israelites from darkness and bondage. Peter tells his listeners in 1 Peter 2 what they are. They are a called-out people. He says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who (get this) CALLED YOU OUT of darkness INTO his marvelous light. Once you were not a people; but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Is Matthew merely saying something like she had been inside and now she came outside. Well, maybe. But the context is all about her identity and her locality and her ancestry. In fact the way that she COMES OUT suggests a break with her past and a change in her future. She is not now who she used to be. Her past and her place and her people no longer define who she is. Once she was not part of God's people but now she is. Once she had not received mercy, but that is precisely what she comes seeking.

When a person comes to Christ, their past is the darkness in which they used to walk and the hostility to God in which they used to live. But if you have COME OUT to Christ, behold the old things have passed away and new things have come.

We are not done with startling aspects of this woman. Fourth is the initial words she spoke to Jesus. She cried out "Have mercy on me!" This is not the cry of entitlement. It is not the appeal of one who believes they have a claim on some benefit. It is the cry of one who asks NOT for what they deserve. It is the cry of a repentant sinner whose conscience is shattered by the guilt of their sin and their unworthiness. It is the cry of one who

asks that another take notice of their awful and pitiable position and graciously stoop to help. "Have mercy on me" are the first words of the fifty-first Psalm in which David cries out appealing that God will blot out his transgressions, wash thoroughly his iniquity and cleanse him from all his sin. Have mercy is an admission that I am seeking what I do not deserve. I deserve the opposite of what I seek.

Finally, this Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon addresses Jesus in a way that is astonishing. She calls him Lord and Son of David. She is acknowledging that standing before her is the King of Israel. And she is confident that his authority stretches to the spirit world, the realm of demons. With these words she is owning not the king of Tyre but the king of heaven. And what is even more striking about her profession is the fact that given all the advantages that some have and all the disadvantages that others have, she should be the last to have a confession like this. Who should be the first to make this confession? It should be the confession of the Scribes who study and teach the law. They should be the ones to see that Jesus is the Son of David, but they have written him off. They have rejected him. But this woman a descendant of a people of darkness, a citizen of a satanic land, she should be the last. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Matthew gives us a picture in this pagan woman of the reception Jesus should have received among the Jews. He came to his own and his own received him not, but he came to this outsider and she did what they should have!

In the next section

II. Jesus Responds in Astonishing Fashion.

A. If the cry of this woman is remarkable, the response of Jesus is just as much so. Initially, he said nothing. For an extended period of time he remained silent. She seized the attention of everyone around and Jesus appears determined to be oblivious. He appears to ignore the woman. He did not answer her a word.

B. Then his disciples, being restless and annoyed, BEGGED him to send her away. It sounds like they were asking him to just do what she asked so as to get rid of her. But then Jesus speaks to those disciples and says, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

C. But the woman will not be deterred. She kneels before Jesus and continues to plead, "Lord help me." Then Jesus makes this SHOCKING statement: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." In this illustration the children are the Jews and the woman is a dog.

Now there are two different Greek words for dog. One kind of dog is the wild and ravenous sort which made their abode near the garbage heaps. These dogs appear in scripture as vicious and dangerous false teachers. The word here however is of a domesticated household pet. It is not quite as repulsive, but nevertheless it is still a demeaning reference. The food that is for the people God has chosen is not for you. It is not right to give to you what belongs to them.

So Jesus first is silent. Then he says she is not the reason he came. Then he says that as a dog she should not get what is meant for the Jews. This is astonishing! Jesus! The one who says, "Come to me ALL who are weary and heavy laden . . ." now appears to be holding back. He healed other Gentiles before this. But now he is using arguments that might well have come from the scribes and Pharisees. For this reason his response is quite shocking. What is he doing? One thing we can be sure of is that Jesus has a purpose. There is a reason for everything he does.

D. It seems to me that Jesus is accomplishing two objectives. First, he is testing and proving the faith of the woman. Is it a faith that is rock solid and unshakeable? Is it a faith that will hold on to him no matter what? Is it a faith that holds tight even when it is perplexed? Is it a faith that is marked by humility? For God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Putting people of faith to the test is not unusual for God. He certainly tested Abraham. Hear what Paul says of Abraham's faith. "In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told ... he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead (since he was a hundred years old) or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith, as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:18-22).

Peter writes about tested faith. He instructs that the grief of trials tests the genuineness of our faith. Tested faith he says is more precious than tested gold even though it is tested by fire. And tested faith results in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself put this woman's faith to the test and she glorified Christ Jesus right then and there.

And here is a second objective. Jesus is demonstrating to his disciples and to us that no argument raised by anyone can keep the grace and mercy of God from going to the world. We see it as we move forward to the final appeal of the woman.

That brings us to the third section. Here ...

III. The Woman Replies in Mind-Boggling Affirmation.

A. Jesus had referred to her as a dog. "It is not right to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs." I can just hear a representative voice of our day and age crying out in reply. "Are you calling me a dog? How dare you call me a dog! I am not a dog! You are a misogynist and an abuser. You are phobic! I am somebody and I am just as deserving of your work as anybody!" In our day of entitlement and self-love being called the greatest love, pride and arrogance run rampant through the streets of town and through the posts on social media.

B. But that is not the way this woman responded. Her reply is mind-boggling because it sets pride aside. She affirms and agrees with Jesus. "Yes, Lord." She owns that she is a dog. She is not an Israelite. She is not worthy of the food for the children. But when children eat, crumbs fall to the floor. I know when Titus eats morsels are sometimes thrown to the floor. The woman asks, could there not be a crumb they reject that could come her way?

C. Sometimes the truth hurts. It hurts our pride. The truth about who we are by nature is uncomfortable. The exposure of our guilt and uncleanness is detestable to the flesh. This week I read the sermon of Stephen to the accusing Jews. Starting with Joseph, he showed them how they had always rejected the saviors God sent their way. They had rejected Joseph. They

had rejected Moses and all the prophets and now they had rejected Jesus. The crowd was enraged. Rather than repenting, they reacted and rejected Stephen, stoning him to death. When we look in the mirror of God's word, it uncovers terrible truths about us. Nothing is wrong with the word. What is wrong is with us. Sometimes the truth hurts.

It is evidence of trouble in our time that hymn-editors have taken to updating the language of some of the great old hymns. They have removed words like "worm" and "wretch" and replaced them with words that are not so degrading. But the fact is there are no words that rightly reflect the depth of our sinfulness. There are no terms that accurately and deeply enough express the depths of evil that is human sin. Dog is too light a term for human acts that defy God, shatter peace, induce death and necessitate the cross for forgiveness.

But we need to look at the Canaanite woman and instead of hollering, disputing, and defending ourselves, we just need to say, "Yes, Lord." We need to say with David, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. You are right. You are just and I am wicked and unworthy. That is why I cry for your mercy." The disposition of this woman is the disposition that is required from anyone who will receive God's forgiveness. It is this disposition that recognizes a need for a gift that only can be purchased by Jesus Christ upon the cross.

The final section of the drama is found in verse 28. In the culmination of the drama ...

IV. Jesus Declares the Greatness of the Woman's Faith.

A. Great faith does not plead innocence. It does not seek to make its own path of forgiveness. Great faith says, "Yes, Lord. But all I need is a crumb from the table."

B. What is especially striking in Jesus' pronouncement is the transformation of his reference to her. Because of her great faith, he upholds and addresses her directly not as a dog but as a woman. "O, woman, great is your faith." And he granted her request.

This Canaanite is an example to all. If she can be recognized for her faith, no one else is too far gone. Dignity before God is a gift given to those who in faith admit the indignity of their sin and rest, like this woman did, in the authority and grace and power of the Lord Jesus, the Son of David.

Conclusion

I close this morning with a couple points of exhortation.

First, for the things that matter most in your life, lay hold of Jesus and don't let go. Look back again and again to the Canaanite woman as an example. If you are really desperate and it is according to the will of God, bring your requests to him. And. Do. Not. Stop. And if he seems silent, hold on. And if you begin to wonder if he is willing, persevere. Let the waiting do its faith-proving work in you. Trust in him. Rest in him. Just because the Lord does not answer immediately does not mean there is no answer to come. Not a few psalms ask God, how long O Lord? But they also express continued trust and continued expectancy for God to work.

Second, embrace the truth no matter how deeply it cuts. "The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Sometimes the truth wounds; it uncovers our ugliness. But do not run from it. If you run away from God's truth, you run away from your only hope. It is certainly not a popular thing to do, but we must embrace the whole truth. We must value the effort to embrace the hard truths and trust the one true God who pulls no punches.

Third, let us embrace the glorious fact about the gospel. Acceptance with God is not for the entitled, but for unworthy sinners those who hope in Jesus. None of us is entitled. But the ones who do not reject him, who are not offended by him receive mercy and are assuredly the people of God.

The scripture says, "Behold I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."