

THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH

Matthew 15:21-28

You and I will be better and happier Christians if we will learn well the lesson taught in this entrancing story of this woman of Canaan.

Our Lord Jesus Christ had been in conflict with Scribes and Pharisees. He never enjoyed such discussions. Although He was always victorious in these controversies, they grieved His spirit. He was glad to get away from them.

Shortly after Christ had fed the five thousand, matters had come to a critical point in His ministry. Herod, the murderer of John the Baptist, had heard of Him, was jealous of Him and had made inquiries about Him, presumably with no good intention. The Scribes and Pharisees were hostile toward Him and were seeking an occasion for His destruction. The masses of people had been dazzled by the splendor of His miracles and wanted to take Him by force and make Him a king. These facts made it expedient for Christ to withdraw for a season. Moreover, a withdrawal would enable Him to make a full revelation to the disciples and to prepare their hearts for the inevitable hour of the cross.

Fully aware that hostility toward Him had become more and more bitter, Christ made a journey of at least fifty miles over mountainous country and almost impassable roads outside strictly Jewish territory into the area of Tyre and Sidon. It was also an occasion upon which He deliberately sought retirement and rest. This, Mark made perfectly clear: "From thence he arose, and went away into the borders of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered into a house, and would have no man know it." If not actually in foreign territory, He was at least on the very border, surrounded by more or less pagan population, for whom the Jews had nothing but contempt.

There was one thing which deeply impressed the disciples there. It was the impossibility of concealment for their Master. Quietly He had stolen away. No one had been told where He was going. No sooner had He arrived than someone, who had witnessed His work in Capernaum or elsewhere, recognized Him as the Christ and hailed Him. Seclusion seemed utterly impossible even in pagan territory. "He could not be hid." There was something about Him that defied concealment. He could not be hidden in any house or home in Tyre or Sidon, nor can He today. He could not be hidden in the crowd, nor lost in the multitude in those days. He stands head and shoulders above the multitude today. He towers above all reformers, educators, scholars, philosophers and martyrs.

No prophet ever created such intense interest as Christ Jesus did. Wherever He went crowds followed or gathered when they knew He was there. There were some who loved Him, and there were some who scorned Him, and there were some who wished Him dead; but there were none who could be indifferent. It was not just His miracles that did it, though they deepened the impression. Nor was it just the wonder of His speech, although the charm of it was irresistible. It was the feeling, born they knew not how, and spreading mysteriously and steadily, that here was One Who stood apart from all, and in whose being were unfathomed depths. There was that about His character and work, which, go where He would, attracted attention and recognition, and drew toward Him all of those who were in distress.

was not restricted to an insignificant tribe of people dwelling in a small province in a remote corner of the world. He wanted to be known as the Friend and Saviour of men of all nations. He perceived that her mind was open, as fruitful soil, to receive the truth.

Christ tried her faith by perfect silence. That silence was apparently cold and repulsive. How unlike Christ was this response! As the Friend of sinners, His eye was always quick to discern human sorrow, and His hand was ever ready to relieve it. In this case He acted as if He had not heard the woman at all. It was all so unlike His usual conduct. Strange as it may seem, He utterly ignored the pitiful plea of this broken-hearted mother. It would seem that He walked away from her. But she was not easily shaken off, for she followed Him with her entreaties, which were so loud and earnest that the disciples were annoyed with her importunity. As she continued her frantic appeals, the disciples said, "Send her away; for she crieth after us." Perhaps they meant for Him to cast out the unclean spirit from the girl and thereby get rid of the importunity of the mother.

Christ then tried her faith by seeming indifference. To His disciples, who wanted Him to send her away, our Lord replied, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." That was equivalent to saying, "I am not sent to her. She is asking for blessings not intended for her." Nevertheless, the woman did not question or object to anything which Christ said.

Neither silence nor rebuff could drive her away. She was determined to have an answer. Christ's silence did not discourage her. She remained at His feet. She was a woman of tremendous will power and persistence. This is seen in the way in which she refused to be deflected from the purpose that had caused her to seek the aid of Christ. Even though she encountered silence and met with denial, this woman continued to pray. She believed that Christ could and would help her. Her request was brief, but fervent. Instead of it being a cry of despair it was one of faith. When she made her appeal more urgent saying, "Lord, help me," He replied, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." That is like the snap of a long lash as it is brought down with a quick and vicious jerk that causes the tapered end to bite with cruel eagerness into the tender flesh. We involuntarily flinch at the sound of the words.

Perhaps I should mention the fact that Christ did not use the common word for dogs, but a diminutive form of the term, which had in it something of the note of tenderness. In those Eastern lands the dogs were ever looked upon with contempt, that is, the wild and marauding dogs that were a positive menace to society. But in nearly all the houses there were little dogs that had their place. When our Lord spoke thus to the woman, He did not use the word that described the unattractive and ferocious street dogs, but that which referred to pet dogs admitted to the household. These little dogs were the playthings of the children, and were found constantly around the tables in the homes. Christ told the woman that it was not fitting to take the children's bread and give it to these little dogs.

Seemingly our Lord had told her that His mission was not to any beyond the bounds of Israel, and then He remarked that the bread He had to give is not for heathen dogs, but only for the children of God. That sounded a lot like a positive refusal with somewhat of an insult.

Among these was a woman, belonging to the old Canaanitish race, and living just over the boundary of the land of promise, who approached Christ and made a very earnest application to Him for help. She was an outcast from the Jewish standpoint. She was a Gentile. Her actual nationality was Syrophenician, and therefore her religion was pagan. This woman was in deep distress. A black cloud overshadowed her soul. Her daughter was badly demonized; that is, she was a victim of demoniacal possession.

Discovering that Christ was in her community, this woman sought Him out. She did not go to the disciples because of the shadow over her heart and home, but she went to Christ. Perhaps she had heard the report of His wonderful works of healing. Evidently she had obtained some knowledge of those ancient prophecies on which the Jews founded their faith that a Messiah was to come. In the hour of her dire necessity, she was entirely disillusioned as to the value of her own religion. The one whom she had worshipped certainly could not do anything for her daughter, who was possessed by an unclean spirit. Seemingly the physicians whom she had consulted had pronounced the case incurable. Her heart was breaking, and there had not been anybody to relieve the distress of her daughter whom she loved so dearly.

This Canaanitish woman approached Christ in the right spirit. She prayed, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a demon." The daughter's affliction was the mother's also. To have mercy upon the daughter would be to have mercy upon the mother. She identified herself with a need, with the trouble of her own daughter. Thus there was a genuineness and a sincerity in her prayer. She prayed for mercy for herself since it was her own beloved daughter who was afflicted so grievously. Note that she did not ask for justice, nor plead her own merit, but she begged for mercy. A person may for a time boast of his own goodness and ridicule God's mercy, but eventually, in time of distress, he will seek divine mercy.

This woman came with a proper plea: "My daughter is grievously vexed with a demon." It is both the privilege and the duty of parents to intercede for their children. Do you have a child who is not a Christian? Are you concerned about his or her salvation? Take this matter to the Lord in earnest prayer.

One is certainly impressed by this mother who was pleading the cause of her little girl. It was a mother's love, intensified by the suffering of her daughter, that inspired her prayer. If mothers in every generation were always as concerned for the physical, moral and spiritual welfare of their children as this mother was, this world would be a different place.

When this mother came to Christ on behalf of her afflicted daughter, "He answered her not a word." Why did He react that way? Was it by reason of indifference? Oh, no; His was the gentlest heart that ever beat. He was not indifferent to that "me" of her appeal, in which she so pathetically identified herself with her ailing child. Was it then because of inability to help? Not at all, because there was no limit to His power. He was fond of applying His divine skill to the most desperate cases. It is recorded that when He passed through the villages the people brought out their sick and laid them in couches along the way, and "He healed them all." No, these were not the grounds of His strange silence.

Her utmost hope, as an outsider, was that He might grant her request. Christ wanted to teach her that He was not a provincial Christ, that His mission

But, out of what seemed a rebuff, she drew a plea. She was willing to admit the charge, but unwilling to forego her claim. She replied in substance, "I am but a Canaanite dog, but Lord, even the little doggies eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table. Meals for the master, scraps for the puppies, have you none for my little daughter? Call me dog if you will, but even the dogs have a place in the household of their master." She kept on praying because she believed that Christ would answer her. He tested her, and found an humble and believing heart. She so revealed the strength of her faith as to evoke this eulogy from the lips of Christ, "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour." The cure was instantaneous and perfect. Great faith insures great blessing. We often receive very little because we do not ask for or expect much.

This same road is open to us. It may be a father or a mother praying for a child; it may be a pastor praying for his church; it may be a Sunday School superintendent praying for the boys and girls in a department, or a teacher praying for a pupil in a class; it may be a Christian worker praying for lost souls. Regardless of who it may be, and whatever the object of prayer, the answer will depend upon one's waiting and persisting in earnest prayer. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." We have a beautiful hymn entitled, "O Love, That Wilt Not Let Me Go." We need another one entitled, "O Faith, That Wilt Not Let Him Go." Answers to prayers are often delayed, but delays are not always denials. God does not always mean to discourage you when He delays in answering your prayers. From the beginning Christ intended to answer this pleading woman. But He only wanted her persistence, her singleness of heart to be widely known. He wanted to impress the apostles, and then He wanted this thrilling incident written down for uncounted millions of others to read and know that He is glad to answer prayers when Christians truly mean business.