

“The Mother Who Wowed Jesus” (Matthew 15:21-28)

An elderly woman walked into the local country church. A friendly usher greeted her at the door and helped her up the flight of steps. “Where would you like to sit?” he asked. “The front row please,” she answered. “You really don’t want to do that,” the usher said. “The pastor is really boring.” “Do you happen to know who I am?” asked the woman. “No,” said the usher. “I’m the pastor’s mother,” she replied indignantly. “Do you know who I am?” the usher asked. “No,” she said. “Good.”

I just love this story. And it’s only fitting that I use this illustration since my own mother sent it to me. Of course, I hope that you will not find me boring, but even if you do, you will not find the heroine of Matt 15 boring. She is a mother who wowed Jesus. As we read her story, ladies (and gentlemen) will be challenged to wow Jesus as well.

But today, maybe you’re not feeling terribly energetic. You may be feeling weary, beat down, and hopeless. Let’s face it, there are a lot of pressures on moms today. Being a mom is the toughest job in the world. Our success-driven society expects that you will have a successful career, keep the house spotless, raise perfect children, be a great cook, look like a model, and be a charming hostess and conversationalist. It’s no wonder many mothers feel wiped out! Yet, Jesus wants you to simply be a woman of faith and persistence. That’s all He requires of you. Let’s now look at Matt 15:21-28.¹

In 15:21, Matthew writes, “**Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon.**”² In Matt 15, the Jewish leaders are beginning to turn against Jesus. As a result, Jesus turns more to the Gentiles.³ Tyre and Sidon are port cities located in modern-day Lebanon and Syria. Earlier in his gospel, Matthew points out that the people of Tyre and Sidon are not known for their faith (11:21-22), yet we are about to meet a mother from this region who displays faith that wows Jesus (cf. 15:28). This passage is dripping with irony: The Jewish leaders are rejecting Jesus, and a Gentile mother who hardly knows Him is seeking mercy.

In Mark’s account of this story we learn that Jesus entered a house in Tyre and didn’t want anyone to know of it, yet He could not escape notice (Mark 7:24b). Although Jesus was shunning popularity, everywhere He went His reputation preceded Him. Hence, in 15:22, Matthew writes, “**And⁴ a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.’**” So Jesus is inside a house and a woman has heard about Him. She comes to the house and gets as close to Jesus as she can. But Jesus and His disciples are either eating or deep in conversation. Unable to gain His attention, this mother calls out to Jesus for “mercy” for her demon-possessed daughter. She does not ask for a miracle or proof of His power, but mercy!⁵ What a wise move by this mother.

Most mothers are full of mercy and compassion. This is not often true of fathers. When one of my children gets hurt, I usually say, “You’re all right. You’re going to be okay. Walk it off. Stretch it out. Let’s wipe it off.” Lori, on the other hand, will be far more gentle and sensitive. She will exude empathy and care. This is not a mark of weakness; it is strength. Many times, the pain our children feel is more than they can bear. Mothers can make that connection with their feelings that fathers find hard to do. Mothers understand mercy. Mothers, when you approach Jesus, do you ask Him for mercy? Do you regularly acknowledge that you do not deserve God’s help? This is the way we ought to pray.

Notice as well that this mother addresses Jesus as both “Lord” and “Son of David.” She acknowledges that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah (see Ps 110:1; 2 Sam 7:16) and she is pleading with Him on that basis to heal her daughter. Mothers, how do you approach Jesus? Do you acknowledge Him for who He is? Do you esteem Him? Do you find new and creative ways to praise Him? This is God’s heart for you.

It is important to recognize that this mother crossed four great barriers to approach Jesus.

- 1) Let me state the obvious—this mother was a woman. Before you snicker, please remember that in biblical times women were not esteemed. They were typically ignored and dominated by men. Yet, this mother was willing to lay that aside and seek out Jesus, even though His 12 disciples surrounded Him.
- 2) This mother was a Gentile. In biblical times, Gentiles and Jews did not get together over food. Yet, this woman approaches Jesus and His disciples in a home while they are eating.
- 3) This mother was a Canaanite. This may not mean much to you, but Canaanites were Israel's greatest enemies (cf. Deut 7).
- 4) This mother's daughter was demon-possessed. Therefore, she would have been considered spiritually unclean. However, instead of calling Ghost-busters, this mother called on Jesus! She went to the right person.⁶ This poor mother had to cross many barriers: racial, social, cultural, and spiritual. Are you willing to cross barriers to approach Jesus?

What exactly was it that drove this mother to cross barriers and get to Jesus? Three motivations compelled her to seek Him out.

- 1) *Desperation*: She has exhausted all other avenues to heal her daughter (e.g., her gods, her medicines, and her own strength). Now she would seek help from Jesus, regardless of the cost. How desperate are we to have Jesus meet our need?
- 2) *Love*: She loved her child and would do anything she could to ensure that Jesus healed her. She was willing to tackle any obstacle she encountered. How much do we truly love our spouse, children, or friends? Are we willing to pray as if their spiritual health depends upon us?
- 3) *Vision*: She saw in Jesus a compassion that would not turn her away. She believed in His ability and willingness to help. The measure of our faith is conditioned by what we see in Jesus. Will we have a vision that Jesus is compassionate and merciful and will intervene in our time of need?

This must grip us. Two truths stand out: (1) Biblical faith focuses on God instead of the obstacle. (2) Our faith in God grows greater as we identify who God is. In this, we are able to recognize the greatness of our God. What problems are you up against? Where is your focus?

After this woman's insistent pleading, you would expect Jesus to respond to her. However, in 15:23 we read these surprising words: **“But He did not answer her a word.”** Why? Was Jesus ignoring her? NO! He was allowing everyone within earshot to hear her identification of His person! Up to this point, Jesus has not revealed His identity. He is demonstrating His identity by His actions, but not by His own verbal assertion. So Jesus allows this Canaanite woman to publicly declare His divine identity!

Verse 23 goes on to say: **“And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, ‘Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.’”** Since the disciples had never seen Jesus refuse to heal anyone, they wanted Him to heal the woman's daughter so she would stop bothering them.⁷ The great irony is, Jesus' own disciples have yet to fully catch on! They want to toss her out of the home they are in because she is shouting at them. They still don't understand who Jesus is. But Jesus allows her to continue shouting for the benefit of the 12 disciples. He wants His disciples to hear the confession of this Canaanite woman.

Our Lord's silence does several things. It conveys to the reader that He is not obligated to respond. This mother has no basis on which to appeal to Jesus, except to cling to His mercy. Our Lord's silence was an encouragement to this woman. Remember, the disciples are pressing Jesus to get rid of her. When Jesus kept silent, He was refusing to grant the disciples' request. To this woman, Jesus' silence was golden, at least in part. A command from Him to leave would have ended her hope for mercy.⁸

In 15:24, Jesus answered His disciples' request by saying, **"I was sent only to the lost sheep⁹ of the house of Israel."** Jesus wanted the disciples and the woman to understand that His ministry in the brief time He had on earth was very focused. He was the Son of David, the Messiah. He was sent only to minister to Israel.¹⁰

Yet, in all of this, this mother would not be overcome by discouragement. She would not be discouraged when Jesus did not respond to her cry for mercy. Instead, in 15:25 Matthew writes, **"But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, 'Lord, help me!'"** This mother's desperate feeling of helplessness and her confidence in Jesus' ability to meet her need are obvious in her posture and her words. Matthew used the imperfect tense to describe her kneeling to make her action even more vivid. She did not just kneel, but she was kneeling. This was the attitude of a humble servant. He uses the word "bow" (*proskuneo*), which means to worship. Out of recognition of Christ's divine authority as the King of Israel, the woman bows in worship before Jesus. One of the most powerful prayers that anyone can pray is embodied in these three words: "Lord, help me!" A person must lay aside all self-righteousness and all confidence in the flesh to be able to cry out from the depth of one's soul this three-word prayer! Mothers, I recognize you come to this place frequently. But how often do you pray this simple prayer?

Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, Jesus utters an unusual response: **"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"** (15:26). This sounds like politically incorrect language. Is it? Well, yes and no. Jesus was politically incorrect. He talked about money, hell, morality, absolute truth, and being the only way to God. But this statement is not nearly as bad as it sounds. Let's set the scene again. Jesus and His disciples had entered into a home in order to eat a meal. Since the woman interrupted their meal, Jesus simply used an analogy that would have been easy for her to understand. The disciples sitting at the table with Him would have been "the children" who were being satisfied by the meal they were eating. It would be inappropriate for Jesus to stop what He was doing in order to feed the dogs (i.e., Gentiles). It is important to realize that Jesus is not calling this mother a mangy mongrel or stray that roamed the streets and waysides of that day. In this context, Jesus uses a term that could be translated "puppies" and could refer to house pets.¹¹ Jesus seems to be using an analogy based on common household life—the family eats before the house pets. Our Lord in reality tenderly uttered what might at first appear as highly derogatory. It is thus not a derogatory term per se, but is instead intended by Jesus to indicate the privileged position of the Jews.¹²

By His response, Jesus basically says, "No" to this woman's request! Jesus can test our faith by being discouraging to us when we pray. He seems to say, "No," and this reveals whether we are serious about what we have asked and whether we shall lightly surrender our request. God likes us to have spiritual ambitions; He is pleased when there are things that we eagerly desire from Him and which we will not lightly give up.¹³ Faith holds on even when God seems to say "No." And faith clings to God's character and works.

This Canaanite woman rises to the challenge and offers an amazing reply, **"Yes, Lord, but even¹⁴ the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs"** (15:27). This mother refuses to take "no" for an answer. Instead of getting mad at Jesus and threatening Him with a lawsuit, she acknowledges that Jesus is right! Yes, she says, it is right for you to be responsible for your own children, the disciples. But when a father is looking after his children he has sufficient mercy to throw the dogs a crumb or two. I may be a dog, but won't you show mercy and throw me a crumb? The woman asks for literally "little crumbs," not a catered, full-course meal, rather just a crumb of Jesus' power.¹⁵ This woman's response reveals that she understands more about the bread that Jesus offers than His own disciples do. The disciples had seen the feeding of the 5,000 and will witness the feeding of the 4,000, but still do not understand the bread that Jesus offers.¹⁶ The disciples have great difficulty receiving the kingdom as little children (10:15); yet this woman will receive the kingdom as a little dog!

What made this mother's response so magnificent was she demonstrates a complete absence of pride, self-reliance, and self-righteousness. And her answer demonstrates total dependence upon God. When she answered Christ, she didn't attempt to build herself up or argue her own worthiness. She didn't say, "I'm just as worthy as any Jew." She didn't say, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, I deserve to have my prayer answered." Instead, she said, "Lord, if the Jews are the children that sit at the table, and the Gentiles are the dogs that sit at their feet, then that's fine—because the dog gets the crumbs and a crumb is all I need. The leftovers of your power are more than enough for me."

Many of you moms are probably saying of yourself, "I don't deserve the full blessings of God. I don't deserve His help. Why should I bother to ask?" Here's why: Even if all you deserve is a crumb, a crumb is more than enough to meet your needs. Think of God's unlimited ability to bless a marriage. Even if you received only a fraction of His power in your marriage—your marriage would never be the same. Think of God's unlimited ability to bless your children. Even if you received only a fraction of His power in your children's lives—they would never be the same. Think of God's unlimited ability to bless a life.

This mother's words reveal great faith and spiritual wisdom. She did not ask for help because her case made her an exception or because she believed she had a right to Jesus' help. She did not argue about God's justice in seeking the Jews first. She simply threw herself on Jesus' mercy without pleading any merit.¹⁷

We are reminded that the word "ask" in Matt 7:7 is a present imperative, continuous action, and thus can best be translated "ask, and keep on asking, and it will be given to you." This mother relentlessly followed this course of action and, as we can readily see, achieved the result she so desperately desired. The contrast is truly striking: In Israel Jesus was trying to convince people He was the Messiah, and was being challenged to prove it with a sign. But here in Gentile territory he met a woman who was convinced He was the Messiah and He could not discourage her efforts. His apparent attempt to put her off was therefore a test, and her great faith must have been gratifying to the Savior.

There are a lot of "little people" who know a lot of theology and live it. Men, I have to tell you that to our shame most of our mothers and wives are more theologically savvy than we are. This mother understands God's ways! I like this and Jesus liked it as well, because in 15:28 He says, "**O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed at once.**"¹⁸ Jesus responds with emotion: "O woman." Her faith is rewarded. And she becomes one of the early Gentiles to enter the kingdom. Jesus responded emotionally to her trust; it moved Him deeply. The woman's faith was great because it revealed humble submission to God's will, and it expressed confidence in His Messiah to do what only God could do. Jesus healed the girl with His word, and immediately she became well (cf. 8:13; 9:22).

What a reminder that we must keep asking, even when God seems silent. There are times in your life when you'll pray for things, and it may seem to you as if God doesn't hear. It may seem as if He turns a deaf ear. When this happens, it's your chance to see your faith grow. Keep asking. Some of you may be saying, "I don't want to keep asking. I don't want my faith to grow. I just want God to make my problem go away." The fact is that God will help you with your problem, but He wants to do much more than that. He wants to change you. He wants to make you a better person. He wants you to be more like Christ. Your problem is temporary, but who you are and who you become will last for eternity. God is looking at the big picture. When He is momentarily silent it is because He is drawing out your faith. He wants your faith to develop into great faith.

When you take a prayer request to God, you need to ask yourself first, "How long am I willing to pray for this? How many times am I willing to ask?" Are you willing to keep asking, even if the answer doesn't come easy? If you're not willing to persist in prayer, you won't see consistent results in your prayer life.

Here's something I've learned about prayer. Prayer works best when it is our only plan, not when it is just one plan among many. If we pray with the attitude that says, "I'll try this for awhile and if it doesn't work I'll try something else," then our prayers won't get very far. If the woman in our story today had thought, "I'll ask Jesus to heal my daughter, and if He doesn't listen to me I'll go find another preacher to help me," her prayers would not have been answered.

There's an old saying: God's delays are not God's denials. Just because you don't get your answer immediately doesn't mean that you won't get an answer eventually. The answer to your prayer will come. Great faith is demonstrated by persistent prayer. Keep praying even when God seems silent.

You have probably seen the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. You may even know that it is one of the most financially successful movies of all time. However, what you may not know is this: The movie was made in 1939, but it didn't show a profit until 1964 when the television rights were sold. It took 25 years for that movie to become profitable, and it became profitable only because MGM kept pushing the movie. Eventually their persistence paid off big-time. Your persistence in prayer will pay off, too. The biggest payoff of all is that your faith will grow. Keep praying as long as it takes.¹⁹

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“The Mother Who Wowed Jesus” (Matthew 15:21-28)

1. The Canaanite mother sought Jesus out on her own initiative (15:22). When I find myself in need, do I immediately pursue Jesus? What need has God recently brought into my life that has led me to seek Jesus? How did Jesus show Himself faithful to me?
2. When the Canaanite mother approached Jesus she said, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David” (15:22). What is significant about this petition? How do I approach Jesus? Do I acknowledge Him as Messiah and Lord? How concerned am I about acknowledging and affirming His character?
3. This mother cared for her daughter and refused to take “no” for an answer (15:23-27). How does biblical faith focus on God instead of the obstacles? Have I exercised this type of faith? What was the outcome? How did my faith in God grow greater as I identified who God is? What problems am I currently up against? Where is my focus?
4. Jesus rewarded this mother’s faith by healing her demon-possessed daughter (15:28). What characteristics or behavior did this woman exhibit that wowed Jesus? Would Jesus tell me that I have “great faith?” Why or why not? How can I increase my faith?

Notes

¹ The parallel passage is found in Mark 7:24-30.

² Jesus withdrew about 30-50 miles north into Gentile country to control the timing of things. He did not want people to make Him king, and He did not want the confrontation with His enemies to come to a head too soon. So frequently He withdrew, or told people not to say anything about the miracle, or a number of other unexpected acts. It appears that Jesus withdrew for a time, both to let the conflict settle a bit, and to turn attention to Gentiles in this act. Interestingly, Jesus has “withdrawn” before (Matt 2:12, 22; 4:12, 12:15, 14:13). However, this is the only time Jesus left Israel during His public ministry.

³ In Matthew 14, John the Baptist was beheaded, a clear sign of the opposition to the movement. But Jesus fed the five thousand, showing that He could meet the needs of Israel; and then He walked on the water, showing that He is the Lord of creation. In Matthew 15, Jesus challenged the teachings of the elders because those teachings had been elevated to the status of Scripture. Then, following that confrontation, Jesus went out of the country to the region of Tyre and Sidon and met a Canaanite woman. Then, as he came back to the region of Galilee, he fed the four thousand, a sign that he could meet the needs of the nations. Then, as we shall see, in chapter sixteen Jesus will give His first prediction of His death. Allen Ross, “The Faith Of A Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28)” in *An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew*: http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=3919.

⁴ Gk. “And behold a Canaanite.” The Greek word *idou* has not been translated because it has no exact English equivalent here, but adds interest and emphasis (BDAG 468 s.v. 1). See NET Study Notes.

⁵ Ed Glasscock, *Moody Gospel Commentary: Matthew* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 324.

⁶ I have appreciated some of the insights of Kenneth Trent, “Worthy To Be Called Mother” (Matthew 15:21-28): <http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=57773&ContributorID=8885>.

⁷ Jesus had previously healed many demon-possessed people (Matt 4:24; 8:16, 28, 33; 9:32; 12:22).

⁸ Bob Deffinbaugh, “A Lesson in Hermeneutics (Matthew 15:21-39)” in *Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* series http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2540#P111_17724.

⁹ The “lost sheep of the house of Israel” does not mean there were lost sheep in Israel, but that all Israel was lost (Isaiah 53: all we like sheep have gone astray).

¹⁰ Romans 15:8 makes it clear that Jesus came to make a legitimate offer of the kingdom to Israel. That fact did not admit this Canaanite woman to the benefits of the covenant made with the Jews. The kingdom had to be fully offered to them first, in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of the kingdom. (The passage is like John 4:22 where it was recognized that “salvation is from the Jews.”) So all the woman could do is ask for mercy, general mercy as a non-Israelite.

¹¹ James A. Brooks, *Mark: NAC* (Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 121.

¹² In a special sense the Israelites were the people of God (see Exod 4:22; Deut 32:6; Isa 1: Hos 11:1).

¹³ Michael Eaton, *Mark: Preaching Through the Bible* (England: Sovereign World, 1998), 68.

¹⁴ In her reply the woman said, “for even,” not “but even” (*kai gar*). This is an important distinction because she did not challenge what Jesus had said but acquiesced to His truthfulness in saying it.

¹⁵ Constable notes, “The Canaanite woman used the diminutive form of ‘dogs’ (Gr. *kynaria*) probably because small dogs are even more dependent than large dogs. She also used the diminutive form of ‘crumbs’ (Gr. *psichion*) that expressed her unworthiness to receive a large blessing.” Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Luke* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/luke.pdf>, 2005), 211.

¹⁶ David E. Garland, *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 289.

¹⁷ Constable, *Notes on Luke*, 211.

¹⁸ Jesus had healed Gentiles before, but this was the first time He healed one in Gentile territory. Both people whom Jesus commended for their great faith in Matthew were Gentiles, this Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion (8:5-13). In both cases Jesus provided healing for them from a distance. In the spiritual sense Gentiles were “far off” until Calvary, when Jesus reconciled them. Then they enjoyed equal footing with Jews in the church (Ephesians 2-3).

¹⁹ Steve May, “The Making of Great Faith: Great faith and persistent faith are synonymous.” Preaching Today sermon: <http://www.preachingtoday.com/31583>.