

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 15, as we continue our journey through this Gospel together. This morning we're looking at three scenes from the life of Jesus. And though these events occurred over 2000 years ago, they are very relevant for us today. The first scene depicts a woman who is deeply concerned for her daughter and has reached the point of desperation. So, if there are any parents or grandparents here today who are worried about a child you love, this story is for you. But it's not only for parents and grandparents. This woman sets an example for us all, when we feel deep concern of any kind, as we'll see, she embodies 1 Peter 5:6-7 which says,

*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:6-7).*

This woman shows us the blessing of humility, the power of persistent prayer, and how our Lord responds when we seek his mercy. Then, the second scene in our passage shows us how to respond to the mercy Christ gives. It can be tempting to forget him when the problems go away, and all is well. But we will see a crowd of people who receive healing and help from Jesus, who then take that provision and let it fuel their praise. Far from forgetting God and all his benefits, they glorify him. Finally, in the third scene, we'll get a glimpse of the glory to come, the heavenly banquet Jesus has prepared for all who trust in him, and we will see how anticipating that feast will fill us up with hope, even when the trials of this life remain.

So, friend, have you come here today with any burden, any angst, any sorrow weighing upon your heart? Do you need help and hope? Let's learn from these verses what it looks like to seek mercy from Jesus, glorify God for the grace he provides, and anticipate the feast that is to come for all who trust in him. We'll start with the story of this Canaanite woman, who shows us what it looks like to humbly...

### **1. Seek Mercy**

Let's pick up the story in Matthew 15, verse 21: *And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*

Jesus has just left a region on the sea of Galilee mainly populated by the Jewish people and has come to a region mainly populated by Gentiles. As we'll see later on, this is very significant. The district of Tyre and Sidon is on the northwest side of the sea of Galilee, and these cities were frequently condemned by Old Testament prophets for their idolatry and opposition to Israel. But Jesus withdraws to this region and in verse 22 we read, *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"* (Matthew 15:22).

You may not be very familiar with the cities of Tyre and Sidon, but if you've read the Old Testament, you've certainly come across the Canaanites. These were some of Israel's most notorious and hostile enemies. These were the people God drove away from the promised land because of the depth of their depravity and the extent of their rebellion against him. But something new is happening here. A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus, but she does not come in hostility, she comes in humility looking for mercy.

Her daughter is severely oppressed by a demon, gripped by some deep darkness, and this woman has clearly heard something about Jesus and his ability to heal. More than that, she has come to a key conclusion about Jesus's identity. She calls him, "Lord, Son of David." Somehow, this woman has learned about Israel's hope in a Messiah, a descendant of King David who would bring God's blessing to his people. So, she's saying to Jesus, "I know that's who you are. And I've heard of your power. Will you please bless me by healing my little girl?"

As we watch this interaction unfold, I want us to consider this as a model prayer. You might not initially think of this scene like a prayer. But here is someone drawing near to Jesus, seeking his mercy, and asking for his help. Which is exactly what we do when we pray. Therefore, there's a lot we can learn about prayer from these verses. And as I studied this story, it reminded me how much faith and persistence prayer often requires. Because when we pray, Jesus does not always answer right away. At least not in the way we may have wanted. And sometimes, it can feel like we're speaking into the void, not receiving any response at all. Which is exactly what happens to this woman. Again, she comes to Jesus asking him for mercy. Then, we read this in verse 23: *But he did not answer her a word* (Matthew 15:23).

Does that surprise you? She asks him for help, and he doesn't answer her? Not even a word? That might not be what we would expect to read. But hasn't that been your own experience? Haven't you ever prayed for a child who was in trouble, or some other painful situation, only to find that Jesus is initially silent? The answer doesn't come right away. Hope doesn't flood into your desperate heart. It's like nothing happened. If you've ever had that experience in prayer, you're not alone! It happened to this woman. It happened to Job. Job 30:20 has one of the most gut-wrenching lines in the whole book. Job says to God, "*I cry to you for help and you do not answer me.*"

Or listen to C.S. Lewis reflecting on what it felt like to approach God in prayer after the death of his wife. He writes, "When you are happy... and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away."

It is not uncommon to cry to Jesus, and then initially, to experience silence. The question is, what do we do when that happens? We could give up and turn away. But we must persist! That's what Lewis did. That's what Job did. And this woman did too. In fact, she persisted so intensely that she frustrated the disciples! Look at the rest of verse 23: *And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us."*

"Jesus, please! This woman won't let up! Won't you do something so that she'll leave us alone?" Verse 24: *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Matthew 15:24).

It's not clear if Jesus is answering the disciples or the woman when he says these words. But either way, the woman would have heard. And she could have been deeply discouraged. Jesus is saying, "She's right, I am the Son of David, I am the Messiah... but I am Israel's Messiah."

Remember, she is a Gentile, a Canaanite! How could she expect blessing from God? But she will not stop seeking his mercy. Verse 25: *But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."* She draws closer, kneels down in a posture of reverence and humility, and her pain is palpable. Those three words capture it all. *"Lord, help me!"* My daughter is in terrible danger. There's nothing I can do. But you can heal her! Please. Help her. Help me.

And if you thought Jesus was coming across a little cold, he responds with his hardest words yet. Verse 26: *And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"* (Matthew 15:26).

Now hold on! Did Jesus just call this desperate woman a dog? Why in the world would he say that? Well, there was a real distinction that existed between Israel and the gentile nations at this time. The Israelites enjoyed the special status of God's chosen children, while the gentile nations remained God's enemies, dogged in their rebellion against him. And Jesus is highlighting the reality of that distinction. But more than that, Jesus is testing the nature of this woman's faith. Like gold that passes through a fire and comes out refined and brilliant, Jesus is putting this woman through a test that will prove the reality and the beauty of her trust in him.

And listen to what she says. Verse 27: *She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table"* (Matthew 15:27). This is remarkable. She doesn't say, "Excuse me! Did you just call me a dog?" She says, "Yes, that's precisely what I am. I'm a Gentile. I'm a Canaanite!" "I am a sinner, totally unworthy of your mercy and your blessing, but Lord, couldn't you at least spare me a crumb from the table?"

This is real faith! This is true humility! This is the way to pray! And how does Jesus respond to this? Verse 28: *Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire."* *And her daughter was healed instantly* (Matthew 15:28). This is the first time in Matthew's gospel that anyone's faith is called "great!" Jesus knew her faith was great from the moment the conversation began. But he wanted to draw it out for everyone to see. His initial silence was not indifference. His delay in healing was not reluctance. He put this woman to the test to put her faith on display to show us all, this is the way to seek mercy.

So, let me ask you:

- Do you need mercy today?
- Do you need help from Jesus?
- Is your heart full of angst for a child, another family member, or a friend?
- Is someone you love trapped in darkness and you want to see them delivered, and walking in the light?

Or is it something else?

- Is it some need for forgiveness, provision, or endurance?
- What mercy do you need that Christ alone can provide?

Ask him! See this mercy from him! And as you do, follow this woman's example. When he seems silent, when you wonder if he will ever respond at all, don't walk away. Keep praying. In Luke 18:1, Jesus encouraged his disciples *to always pray and not lose heart*. We all know it can

be tempting to lose heart as we pray, especially when our requests are not answered quickly, or in the way we would have chosen. But this woman has shown us the power of persistent prayer. And she has shown us the beauty of humble prayer. Let's follow her example, watching out, lest we ever begin to pray with a sense of entitlement.

As John Calvin says, if we want to pray rightly, "Pride... must fall down, [we must] learn that by nature we are dogs." We too must acknowledge that we are totally unworthy to receive God's blessing. As Isaiah 66:2 says, *This is the one to whom I will look... he who is humble, and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.*

Let's pray persistently and humbly. Let's seek mercy from Jesus. And when he answers us, let's...

## **2. Glorify God**

I wanted to spend the bulk of our time on that first scene, so we'll move through the second and third scenes in our passage more quickly. Look next at verse 29: *Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there* (Matthew 15:29).

Jesus leaves this interaction with the Canaanite woman and walks beside the sea before going up on a mountain to sit down. He's traveled by foot, so he has not gone far. Which means, he is still in this predominantly gentile region. Therefore, in the next verse, when we read about great crowds coming to him, we are to envision great crowds of gentiles—non-Israelites—coming to him. Which is very significant, especially when we see what Jesus does for them.

Look at verse 30: *And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them* (Matthew 15:30).

It's an amazing scene! Great crowds of people are coming out to Jesus, bringing their loved ones facing various afflictions, and what are they doing? They are putting them at Jesus's feet. Again, that's what we do when we pray for the people we love! We put them at Jesus's feet, laying their need before him, and asking for his help. And in this instance, Jesus healed them all. It's a remarkable miracle. Not only because of the way the story displays Jesus's mercy and power, but because of the kind of people Jesus healed. The lame. The blind. The crippled. The mute.

Have you ever had déjà vu? Someone says something or does something and you have this strange feeling that you've heard that or seen that before. Well, this is a déjà vu moment as a Bible reader. It should make us ask, "Where have I heard that before?" And the answer is: All the way back in Isaiah 35, when God declared what would occur in the days of his future blessing.

Isaiah 35:5-6 says, *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.*

This was an Old Testament promise of God's blessing, blessing that would come in the days of the Messiah. And in Jesus, the promise is fulfilled! But don't miss this! Here in Matthew 15, the promise is being fulfilled among the Gentiles! So, yes, Jesus is the Messiah—the Savior—of Israel. But with the story of the Canaanite woman, and now all these healings, Matthew is showing us Jesus is the Messiah—the Savior—of the gentiles as well! Which means, Jesus is bringing the fulfillment of one of the oldest promises in the entire Bible.

Back in Genesis 12, God established his special relationship with Abraham and his descendants. But remember what God said in Genesis 12:3. He told Abraham, *I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

God's plan has always been bigger than blessing one nation. God's promise has always been that his gracious blessing would come to people from every nation upon the earth. And in Jesus, the promise is fulfilled. Which is why here in Matthew 15 we see the Gentiles receiving mercy. And how do they respond? Verse 31: *so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel* (Matthew 15:31).

They didn't just take the healing and walk away. They didn't simply rejoice in the gift. They rejoiced in the giver. They glorified God! And when we seek mercy from Jesus, and he provides, let's never forget to do the same. You and I know how easy it can be to pray in desperation, and then receive an answer, only to forget to thank God once the problem has gone away! Let's fight against that. Let's wonder at his grace—marvel at his mercy—and give him praise. This Canaanite woman and these gentile crowds are great examples to us. They show us what it looks like to seek mercy and glorify God.

Finally, in this last scene, I want to encourage us all to...

### **3. Anticipate The Feast**

Perhaps you've listened so far with a nagging question in your mind. Maybe you're thinking, all of this sounds wonderful, but it's not been my experience. Like the Canaanite woman, I have prayed in desperation, but the situation did not improve. In fact, things only got worse. Or, like these crowds, I brought a need and laid it at Jesus's feet, but the healing, the miracle, never came. So where does that leave me? What hope do I have left? It's such an honest, and important, question. And this last scene in Matthew 15 points us to an answer.

In these verses, we get a repeat miracle. Back in Matthew 14, Jesus fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Here in Matthew 15, he does the same thing. Verses 35-37 say *And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied* (Matthew 15:35-37).

There are a few distinct details, but the major difference between these two similar miracles is

the crowd Jesus feeds. In Matthew 14, it was mainly Israelites. Here in Matthew 15, it's mainly Gentiles. It's another reminder that Jesus is fulfilling God's promise to bless all nations. But in both cases, we have a feast in the wilderness as Jesus satisfies a hungry people with supernatural provision. And this is another moment of biblical déjà vu! Because in the Old Testament, God describes the blessing his messiah will bring, like a great banquet that will satisfy the deepest longings of his people. Listen to one example from Isaiah 25:6-9. The prophet declares,

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined (Isaiah 25:6).*

Notice, the Lord will prepare a great feast for all peoples! At this banquet, a tremendous blessing will come. *And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, veil that is spread over all nations (Isaiah 25:7).*

What is the covering cast over all peoples? What is the veil that darkens the experience of all nations? What is the salvation we need most? Salvation from sin's curse... deliverance from death! Verse 8 says, at that great banquet... *He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken (Isaiah 25:8).*

Friends, no matter how many of our prayers are answered in this life, no matter how many of our hopes are fulfilled, we are still waiting for this glorious future! When we will be fully satisfied, and finally saved, from death itself. And verse 9: *It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isaiah 25:9).*

Jesus came to fulfill this promise by dying in our place and rising again. And Jesus will come soon to bring the banquet! To swallow death up forever and to wipe every tear from our eyes! So, seek his mercy. Glorify God with every answered prayer. But always remember, the best is yet to come. And when the waiting is painful, and hard, and oh so long... anticipate the feast! Anticipate the day all who trusted in Christ will say, "This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."