
THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR
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Mercy upon Dogs
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Dear radio friends,

We call our attention to day to an event that took place during the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew records this event for us in chapter 15:21-28. "Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

Jesus' public ministry was drawing to a close. His life was in constant peril. The wicked Jews were out to kill Him in one way or another, and they showed their open hostility and hatred of Him in every way, even going to the extent, mind you, of excommunicating from the church and the synagogue anyone mentioning His name. He could not walk freely in Jerusalem anymore. And even those in Galilee were turning their backs on Him in disdain. So He left these areas for a time.

Matthew tells us in verse 21 that Jesus "departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon." This was the land of the Phoenicians, to the north of Palestine. Mark tells us in his gospel account that Jesus was in a house. Evidently Jesus did not want anyone in the area to know of His whereabouts. He did not want to attract attention to Himself. But He could not be hid, because there was this certain woman who was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician lady, who was calling to Him. And that, of course, drew attention to Jesus. And it was her crying

out to Jesus that set on course the events of the account before us.

It seems her daughter had a devil or an unclean spirit in her. And it vexed her grievously, that is, it forced her daughter to do all kinds of things that hurt her. Her mother was worried sick over her. So much so, that she was willing to leave Phoenicia and seek out Jesus. This act was indeed a bold one, for what Jew would give any time of day to a Gentile?

Well, it is the humble attitude of this woman that we wish to examine. It is not so much the miracle itself that stands on the foreground, but it is God's word as it is found in the actions and confession of this woman. What she acknowledges to Christ here is what we are called to acknowledge to God when we confront ourselves and our sins. We are to view ourselves in no different light than what she saw herself. That was the divine intent of our Lord when He dealt with this woman, to lead her to express her faith in Him. And we pray that this passage of God's Word today may do the same for you and me.

The Gentile woman of this passage makes the most humble expression of her faith in Christ. But it was not some-

thing she spoke immediately. It was drawn, it seems, from her heart and lips by means of the actions and words of our Savior. You see, this woman evidently stood outside the house where Jesus sat with His disciples, and started shouting loudly to Him. And her words were that of a plea, a sincere, really heartrending plea: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David. My daughter is grievously vexed with a devil." Who could resist hearing and answering this woman in her need? It was not for her, after all, that she was pleading, but for her daughter. Her daughter was the object of demon-possession, a horrible malady that fell upon many people, it seems, in Jesus' day. A devil would enter into a person and take over not only his or her soul, that is, her mind and desires, but also the body. And that devil would force a person to do things that normally that person would give no thought whatsoever of doing. That was true of this daughter, too. So this woman was crying, not for herself, but for her daughter.

Matthew tells us in verse 23 of this passage, however, that Jesus answered her never a word. Evidently this cry of the woman was not spoken just once, but repeatedly. She called again and again from

outside the house to Jesus. And the disciples, knowing that Jesus wished no one to know where He was, became rather upset with the woman. In their minds, Jesus was not going to do anything anyway. He did not answer the woman, after all, but just let her continue to cry out to Him. So His disciples besought Jesus. They asked Jesus simply to send her away in order that she might stop crying out.

Instead of giving in to the request of the disciples, Jesus said something to them, which, evidently, was loud enough for the woman to hear. We read of that in verse 24, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In this Jesus was teaching both the disciples and this woman that it was His particular work now to go to the house of Israel and its lost sheep. It was not the focus of Jesus' personal ministry to go to the Gentiles and make known to them salvation from sin.

Now, this statement is striking from a twofold point of view. First of all, it points out clearly that God had not intended to send forth the gospel at this time to Gentile people. It would happen later on. But it was not time yet. Salvation must come first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It must come to the

sheep, that is, those within the sphere of God's Old Testament church. And these sheep, the members of the church, were lost sheep. These sheep were lost in their sin and unbelief and Jesus had come to seek and to save His sheep, that is, those who, by God's grace, acknowledged that they were lost in their sin. That, first of all.

Secondly, Jesus spoke this loudly enough for this woman to hear. And that, in order to teach her something. She in her heathen land and among her heathen people stood outside of God's church in this world. She had walked in unbelief and sin. She and her nation had placed their trust in pagan gods and walked in rebellion against the true God. She was in herself, therefore, unworthy of any mercy from Jesus. She was an alien from the commonwealth of Israel, a stranger from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in this world. Why would Christ, who had come to save His church, show her any attention?

Well, this statement of Jesus sparked a second exchange of words between the two of them. She came to the door of the house, or maybe even into the house, and, we are told, she worshiped Jesus. That term there for worship

means that she bowed down before Him. She paid homage unto Him. In humility, she fell on her hands and knees before Jesus and with pleading eyes once again looked upon Jesus and said, "Lord, help me."

There is reason to believe that the words Jesus now spoke were still not addressed personally to her, but to His disciples. And I say this because in verse 28 we find that Jesus finally answered and said, "unto her." But in this verse we simply read that He answered and said. In other words, Jesus kept talking as it were to His disciples, ignoring her altogether, though she bowed before Him with her plea.

And then the words He spoke seem so very hard and callous, without any pity whatsoever. Jesus was, of course, emphasizing in them what He had first said, that He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. We read these words in verse 26: "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." Ouch! The people of Israel were God's children. He had adopted Israel by His grace to be that nation out of all nations that He had made His own people. So the nation of Israel was considered the nation that contained the children of God. The bread that

Jesus speaks of was the salvation that had come to God's people within the nation of Israel. This salvation, Jesus says to His disciples in this woman's hearing, must be given to these children and not to dogs. Dogs. Stray dogs that wandered about as scavengers, eating whatever they could get their mouths on. They were mongrels, they were outcasts that had no home and no business entering into the house and eating the food of the children.

In other words, Jesus in essence called this woman a dog, a stray, a no-count, a mongrel that deserved nothing from Him because she was not of the household of faith. Now, I would think that by today's standards Jesus would not be labeled the best of missionaries, would He? Talk about turning a person off! But Jesus knows the heart. The words that this woman now spake to Jesus completely amaze me. Listen to her reply (v. 27): "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." This confession is at one and the same time clever, but also shows the greatest humility. "You are exactly right, Lord. Truth, Lord. I am not worthy of anything from you. I do not deserve a thing. I am a dog. But I am not a stray. I am not

a cur. I'm not a mongrel. I am a puppy."

That is the meaning of the term "dog" that she uses as opposed to the term that Jesus used. "I am a puppy that sits around the table of the master and I eat the crumbs that the children allow to fall to the floor. I may not be a Jew, I may not be one of the house of Israel, but I do come to you as a Gentile that believes in you.

And that means that I am not a stray. It means that I *am* in your house, my master's house, be that only as a puppy that wanders around on your floor. But even that puppy is allowed to eat of the scraps of the master's table. Have mercy on me, and give me a scrap."

Oh, that you and I could exhibit that kind of humility in our own lives! We, too, must bow before God and say, "Lord, have mercy on us," because we are no better in ourselves than dogs. We deserve nothing from God. We deserve in ourselves, really, because of our sins, only condemnation and punishment. Who are we to boast in ourselves. Our boast is in Christ alone, and in the salvation that He earns for His people at the

cross. There is redemption alone. Nowhere else can it be found. Certainly it cannot be found in us.

The admission this woman made could only have flowed

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forth out of a heart of faith. Notice her f a i t h . First, she addresses Christ as "O Lord, thou son of David."

She had heard, she must have heard, that somehow Jesus was that Messiah who had been sent by God. She was given by God, therefore, a certain knowledge by which she embraced Christ for who He is. The Lord of lords. The King of the Jews. The rightful Heir unto the throne of David. This Jesus was, in her estimation, that promised Messiah who had finally come.

Second. She worshiped Him, we learn. She bowed humbly before Jesus' feet and paid homage unto Him. To her, He was God. She was confident that He was able to cast out devils, something only someone with divine power was able to do. She believed that Jesus, as Messiah, was capable of casting out the devil from her daughter. That is faith.

And, third. She was mindful of her sins and her own unworthiness. She realized that the only way Jesus would heal her daughter would be by forgiving *her*, first of all, of her own sins. Notice her initial request: “Be merciful to *me*.” It was not, “Show mercy to my daughter.” But, “Show mercy to *me*.” She knew her daughter would not be healed unless Christ would, first of all, be merciful to her, forgiving her of her sin and unbelief and accepting her into His presence.

That is the faith that this woman exhibited.

And that must be the faith *we* reveal in our lives. We must believe that only for the sake of Christ’s death on the cross will God not impute to us our sins, but Christ’s righteousness. We must cast ourselves on the mercy of our Savior, knowing that it is in Him alone that our sins are forgiven us. Only they will be accepted of God as members of His household and family whose sins are forgiven.

Listen now to the response of Jesus to this woman in verse

28: “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.” What a blessed gift this woman received of Christ. Her daughter was made whole! The devil was cast out at that moment. Mark tells us in his account that, when she was come to her house, she found the devil gone out and her daughter laid upon the bed.

Christ knew her faith. Of course He did. He worked it in her. To the eye and the ear it seemed that Jesus was being hard on her. But divinely Christ was working in her heart such faith. And now He acknowledges His own work in her: “O woman, great is thy faith.” Then He granted her the longing desire of her heart. Her daughter was made whole.

But let us take a look at the real miracle performed here. Let us not overlook that. The blessed gift that this woman truly received was not the healing of her daughter, though that was blessed in itself. It was really this: she had obtained mercy with God. Christ would not have healed this Gentile’s daughter if her sin and unbe-

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lief stood in the way. But God was merciful to *her*.

Oh, let us not forget what God's mercy is. It is His love and compassion by which He pities, feels sorry, for His people in their sin. And in that pity towards them in their misery and sin, He for Christ's sake delivers them from that sin and makes them righteous in Christ. In other words, in His great compassion and in His pity for His people, He reaches down and He picks us up out of the miry clay of sin and He leads us to the cross of Christ.

Christ was sent by God in His mercy in order to cover the sins of those whom God pities. That is His mercy. And the Syro-Phoenician woman obtained that mercy. It is that same mercy that we desire in our lives. We are sinners. We are no more than dogs when we stand exposed before God in our sins. We know that. We confess our sins before God: "Have mercy on me, O Lord." And then, you know what? God does have mercy on us. He grants us that blessed gift of His mercy. He gives to us the joy of our salvation in Christ. He tells us that though our sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

We are made whole in His blood. The power of sin and the devil are destroyed, and

Christ has become our Lord. That is the blessed gift we receive from God through Christ.

There is one more thing of which we ought to take note in this passage of God's Word.

The humble attitude of this Gentile believer was a work of God's grace in her heart. If she would have come to Jesus in unbelief, she would have turned away from Him in anger and bitterness, hating Him and probably the Jews with Him all the more. I mean, look at the account. She comes to Jesus with a plea, a cry for help to help her daughter. He did not so much as acknowledge her. He acted as if He did not hear what she was saying. How many of us listening today, if that happened to us would we not already have turned away in anger from Jesus? When someone turns their head on us and shuns us, that hurts. And we often retaliate in anger and leave them. This woman did not do that. When Jesus spoke, He did not even speak to her. He spoke to His disciples. That would have rubbed salt into a pride that was already wounded. But then the clincher: He called her a dog! That would have done *me* in. If left to myself, I would have stomped away in pride and anger and never turned around again. And if this

woman had come in unbelief, that is exactly how she would have reacted too.

But she came in faith. And the reason she came in faith can be explained by only one thing. God revealed Himself to her. And He revealed His Son to her. God worked in her heart by His Spirit and grace, revealing to her who Jesus was and what Jesus had come to accomplish. She knew her sin. She knew her own unworthiness. But she also knew that forgiveness was His to give. She wanted that. And Christ gave it to her.

By grace alone can you or I come humbly acknowledging our sin to our Savior. Neither you nor I can come to God unless God Himself, in His grace, draws us to Him and reveals to us who He is. We cannot come to Jesus except He draws us to Him. We need that Savior.

May we be characterized by faith and may we, today,

bow at the feet of our Savior and Lord. God be merciful to us who are sinners and give us that salvation that is found in the cross of Jesus Christ alone.

Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, we thank Thee again that Thou hast shown mercy unto us. For we confess before Thee that we are such sinners, and that we are unworthy of anything from Thee. We are unworthy of even coming into Thy presence, unworthy of the salvation that Thou hast freely given. We thank Thee for that salvation. And we look to the cross of Jesus Christ alone, where we know we can find it. We can find it nowhere else; there is no other way into Thy presence and into Thy kingdom. Bless us, therefore, with this Word, that we always might be humbled before Thee and be as this woman. We pray these things for Christ's sake. Amen.