

Reminiscere, 2006
Text: Matthew 15:21-28
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✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Are you ready to receive the mercy of God? Are you ready to admit that there is no hope in you or in anything you can do? Are you prepared to quit, to give up, to lay down arms? Are you ready to surrender without condition? Are you ready to leave behind your pride, your self-worth, your high view of yourself and your abilities? Are you ready for what Jesus does to this Canaanite woman?

For God's mercy may only be received by empty hands – hands that bring nothing in trade, for God cannot be bribed. By exercising the woman's faith Jesus shows his disciples what real faith is: coming to God with empty hands to seek his merciful blessing. She lifts up her voice to Jesus and calls out for the Son of David to have mercy. She's got it right. She knows who Jesus is: the long prophesied and promised Messiah who would sit on the throne of David for eternity, God in the flesh. And she believes him to be merciful, she believes that he will remember his tender mercies, his lovingkindness for they are of old.

She cries out this prayer of faith and hears only silence in reply. A prayer that seems unanswered often reveals either faith, despair, or pride. Despair is the lack of faith – when faced with unanswered prayer, despair says, "See, I knew He didn't care. I might as well just give up." But the woman does not give up, she does not despair. She believes that the Lord is good and that he will do mercy. Neither does she succumb to pride, which is anti-faith, faith not in God but in one's self. When faced with unanswered prayer pride says, "Fine! I'll just have to do something about this myself." But the Canaanite woman knows how foolish pride is. For she knows that she can do nothing for her daughter. She is powerless in the face of her daughter's suffering.

But then Jesus is not just silent, but belligerent: "I have come only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" he says. This woman was a Canaanite, the ancient enemy of the house of Israel. In the Old Testament God commanded the wholesale slaughter of her people because they followed after their demonic idols. It would seem that Jesus was fully against her. But still she will not despair, for still she has

faith, trust that the Lord is good and merciful. She throws herself at his feet, kneeling before him and cries out the simplest of prayers, "Lord, help me."

What happens next may shock you – but only if you expect God to be nice. God is not nice. He is Holy and therefore honest. He does not try to be winsome, he has no interest whatsoever in flattering human beings, he does not sugar-coat the bitter pill. He says to the woman, "It is not right for the food of the children to be thrown to the dogs." He calls her a dog. He says she has no right to be called his child, that she has no right to ask him for anything.

Now at this point the woman could turn to self-righteousness. She could say to the Lord, "I'm a dog am I? Well, then who needs a god like you. I'll just go elsewhere for help. At least my old demonic gods of Canaan didn't insult me even if they do torment my daughter – I'll go back to them thank you! I'll figure this out on my own. I don't need this kind of treatment." But this is not the woman's reply because she has no pride left in her. It has been beaten out of her by her daughter's suffering; for the Lord uses suffering to humble us, and he humbles us so that he may lift us up. She knows the truth of the Lord's statement; she knows the verdict of God's Law: that she is a sinner with no demands to make on God. She knows he owes her nothing but punishment and hardship.

Thus the woman is the very picture of repentance for repentance says to the harsh words of God's law, "Yes, Lord, it is so. I am a sinner. I am broken and have chased after evil. There is no goodness in me, that is in my flesh. For all have sinned and fall short of your glory – and I am the chief of sinners." But the woman does not despair, for her repentance is completed in her faith: "Even the little dogs receive the crumbs from the master's table," she says.

That is faith. For faith is trust in the promises of God. And God's promise is to remember his mercies and his lovingkindness for they are of old. She knows the truth of the Lord's statement that she is a dog who deserves nothing. But she does not come to ask what she deserves, she comes to ask for mercy, which is something else altogether. Mercy is getting what you don't deserve. Mercy is, therefore, only for the empty handed, for those who have nothing to give. Mercy is for losers. She trusts that the Lord will do mercy for her for he is Mercy and Love. She knows that this is the Son of David come to do mercy for the whole world, not just the House of Israel. She knows that through him all families of the earth will be blessed, for he is the Seed of the woman who lived long before Abraham and Moses, who has come to crush Satan's head by having his own heel bruised.

What a picture of faith this woman is! Our Lord himself exclaims, "O woman, great is your faith!" She is just like Jacob in our Old Testament lesson for she wrestles with God just as surely as he did. She clings to him and will not let him go until he gives his blessing. She is relentless, for faith is tenacious because faith has no pride, it holds on to the only thing it knows can save it: the mercy of God. Faith calls on God to keep his Word, to remember his mercies, to honor his promises even when it looks as if he never will. Faith does this because it knows it has nowhere else to turn. It cries out, "Even if you have to send me away with a limp, send me away with a blessing, O Lord God. For I will not let Thee go until Thou blessest me!"

Dear Christian, learn from this Canaanite woman and from Father Jacob. Learn to admit that you are nothing but a gentile dog who deserves less than nothing from God. Learn to put away pride and own up to this truth. Repent and turn away from holding on to even a shred of self-righteousness. For God is no respecter of persons. He does not care what job you have or how important people think you are. He doesn't care how smart you are or how rich. God looks at the heart and he does not like what he sees. If this woman of great faith was a dog to him, then what are you who have shown yourself so often faithless?

But like this Canaanite woman, do not despair that God calls you a sinner and a dog. For remember that he is mercy. Remember that God in the Flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the Son of David, the Seed of Eve, the Child of Mary who came to crush Satan's head under his bruised heel. For that is how this woman's daughter is healed: by virtue of the death our Lord would die. For in his death he defeated Satan by succumbing to God's own wrath against sin and death and then bursting out of the grave in resurrected glory. This merciful giving of himself for you conquers all Satanic power.

Therefore rejoice that Jesus still gives healing to those oppressed by Satan. For what else is baptism but the freeing of another soul and body from Satan's grasp? For demon possession is a relative thing. We are all born children of wrath and evil in heart as the Scriptures say; we all need rescue from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil. And it is the washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit that gives us this healing. And in this baptism we receive a new name just as Jacob received a new name in his wrestling match with God. And your new name in baptism is a hundred times more worthy than his; for the very name of God was put on you: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You belong to him now. A dog made into a child of the heavenly Father, a gentile made a son of Abraham through faith in the promise.

Therefore, you have not received mere crumbs from the Table of the Lord. Oh, no. For you have been adopted into the family. The master of the feast has come to you and said, "Friend, come up higher. I have a better seat for you." You have a place of honor at the Table of the Lord and the feast you are served is no mere morsel: it is the very body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and the indwelling of divine life. What a merciful gift this is: for it is the gift of Christ himself in his fullness. What an honor you have been given to receive this feast at the Lord's Table. Surrounded by so many temptations and foes, who shall not hunger for this gift as often as possible? Therefore, hasten back to this altar on Wednesday and on Sunday next to receive with mouth and soul Him who is the Shepherd of the Lost Sheep of Israel, the Savior of the Gentiles, God Incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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