

Sermon Text (Matthew 15:21–28 ESV)

²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And 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.” ²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus Is There to Answer Prayer

Throughout Jesus’ public ministry, he showed love and compassion to all people, both to the Jews and to the Gentiles. Prior to our reading for today, the gospel according to St. Matthew says that a Roman centurion, a Gentile, came to Jesus and said to him, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly” (Matthew 8:6). Jesus responded to the centurion by saying, “I will come and heal him” (Matthew 8:7). This already showed that it did not matter if a person was a Jew or a Gentile to Jesus, but this point was made even clearer in the following verses. When the centurion replied to Jesus by saying, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed” (Matthew 8:8), showing that he recognized his unworthiness and demonstrating his faith in Jesus, Jesus “marveled and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven’” (Matthew 8:10–11).

There were even times when people didn’t have to say anything to Jesus at all for Jesus to help them. The gospel according to St. Matthew also says that “some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven’” (Matthew 9:2). Then, when the scribes who heard Jesus declare this

to the paralytic said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming” (Matthew 9:3), Jesus healed the paralytic so that they “may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Matthew 9:6). Neither the paralytic nor the people with him said a word to Jesus, and yet the paralytic walked away with his bed in his arms, healed and forgiven. Therefore, Jesus’ behavior in our reading for today seems strange.

Our reading begins with a sight that does not seem all too different than any of the other times that Jesus helped those who believed in him and called out to him for help. We hear that “a Canaanite woman from [the district of Tyre and Sidon] came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon’” (verse 22). There are many other times throughout the Gospel when we see Jesus cast out demons without hesitation, but this time was different. This time, Jesus “did not answer her a word” (verse 23), acting as though she wasn’t even there. What strange behavior for Jesus, but if we think that is strange, what follows is even stranger. When the Canaanite woman persists in her pleas for help, Jesus says to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (verse 24), and “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (verse 26). These responses from Jesus didn’t just seem strange, they seemed needlessly cruel.

The Canaanite woman was not deterred by how Jesus treated her. Throughout this entire account, we see that she was persistent in her prayer for help, even though Jesus seemed to not just be ignoring her but also seemed to be calling her not worth saving. Why? Because she had faith, and through that faith, she knew the truth about Jesus. She knew that Jesus was not actually a cruel man who would turn her away and refuse to help her simply because she was a Gentile. She knew that Jesus was actually a man who was willing to help anyone, both the Jew and the Gentile. She knew that the reason that Jesus had come was to offer salvation, the bread of life, to the whole

world, not just the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but everyone from east and west. Jesus would eventually accomplish this by taking the place of the one who is not worth saving. Jesus would show his love for the whole world by facing the punishment that the world rightfully deserved as he hung on the cross. How could such a man ignore the Canaanite woman in her time of need and treat her cruelly? And so, she persisted in her prayer for help, despite it appearing to be a lost cause.

But if Jesus was not actually treating this Canaanite woman cruelly, then what was he doing? He was testing her faith. He was putting her through a trial in which her faith was made stronger. We see the result of this trial when, after Jesus says to her, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (verse 26), she says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (verse 27). Jesus was telling her that she was not worthy to receive his blessings, and the Canaanite woman acknowledged this by saying, “I know I am not worthy. Therefore, I do not ask for your full blessing, but only for the scraps.” This Canaanite woman recognized that she was sinner and was therefore unworthy to receive any help from Jesus. Therefore, she was thankful to receive anything from Jesus and believed that he would help her, even if it was in a small way and even though she didn’t deserve it. And so, “Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly” (verse 28).

If you found yourself in the position of this Canaanite woman, how would you react? Would give up and leave, sad at how Jesus treated you? Would you become angry with Jesus and rebuke him for calling you a dog? You actually don’t have to think too hard about how you would react, because there are times today when it can feel like Jesus is ignoring you and treating you as an unworthy dog.

You bring your requests to Jesus in prayer in confidence that he will answer them. Then, you wait for him to answer your prayer, and it seems like the answer to that prayer never comes. Where is Jesus? Is he ignoring you? So, you continue making the same requests to Jesus, hoping that he will eventually hear you and answer your prayer, but it still doesn't seem like he ever does. Is this something more than just being ignored? Does Jesus actually think that you simply aren't worth helping? What other explanation could there be? After all, if Jesus truly loved you, would he not answer your prayer as you want him to?

During times like these, it seems as though Jesus has left us to endure our afflictions, grief, and anguish all on our own. But this directly contradicts what Jesus promises us in his Word. He says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), and "he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Jesus could have chosen to abandon us at any time. He could have never come down to earth at all, but he did so that he could do what was necessary to save us. He could have spoken up during his trial and saved himself, but instead, he remained silent. He could have come down from the cross when everyone was mocking him, but instead, he remained on the cross to pay the price for our sins. Jesus never abandoned us then, so why would he abandon us now?

But, if he has not abandoned us, what is he doing? It could be that Jesus is testing our faith, just like how he tested the Canaanite woman's faith. Even when it seems like he has abandoned us, we turn to his Word and put our faith in him and his promises, trusting all the more that he hears our prayer and answers them. Through these trials, he makes us stronger.

It could also be that Jesus has already answered our prayer, but he just didn't answer it in the way that we wanted. We may think that Jesus is ignoring us and abandoning us by not answering our prayer in the way that we want him to, but there is more than one way that Jesus

answers prayer. He could answer us by saying, “Yes,” but he could also answer us by saying, “Wait” or, “No, because I have something even better in store for you.” But if this is the case, then what lesson should we learn from the Canaanite woman, who was persistent in her prayer to Jesus? Jesus promises to hear our prayers and answer them, and he wants us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Therefore, we persistently pray to him. But, for all things that God has not promised to give us in his Word, we pray as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, “[N]ot as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). And we know that whatever God’s will for us is for our ultimate good. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

And so, in all things, we pray to God, trusting that he loves us and that his will will be done. But, at the same time, we recognize that our sin makes us unworthy to expect anything of God. We count ourselves lucky to just receive the scraps from his table, as the Canaanite woman did. But, just as Jesus elevated the Canaanite woman to sit at the table with him when he commended her faith, we are elevated through faith in Jesus so that we can ask God anything in Jesus’ name as we ask our fathers here on earth, because, through faith, we are God’s own dear children. This is the blessing and privilege that we have as children of God, a blessing and privilege that is ours because of the sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross, removing the barrier that separated us from God. Therefore, no matter what we are going through in our lives, we know that we can always turn to God in prayer and that he will hear us. And even when we must go through trials, we know that God is on our side and will give us the exact answer that we need.