March 14th, 2021 (Sunday Main Service Sermon)

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The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

[Passage]

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV)

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

25 The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

26 He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

27 “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

28 Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

[Introduction]

Hallelujah!

Today, we are going to look at the part where Jesus talks to a Canaanite woman. In today’s scripture of Matthew, the woman is referred to as “a Canaanite woman,” and in Mark 7, she is referred to as “a Syrophoenician woman.” “Syrophoenician” relates to a region called, “Syrian Phoenicia,” which is in the waterfront near Syria and Lebanon. It is where Tyre and Sidon, the famous overseas trade cities, used to be located in. Today’s scripture starts the story in this region of “Tyre and Sidon,” “Syrophoenician” the foreign region. In the history of the Old Testament, this land used to be one of the regions where the Canaanites lived when the Israelites escaped from Egypt and conquered Canaan, the Promised Land. Thus, the region of “Syrophoenician” was occupied and conquered by the Israelites in many parts. Thus, in today’s scripture of Matthew, this “Syrophoenician woman” is also referred to as “Canaanite woman.”

In the Old Testament, the people of this “Syrophoenician” includes Jezebel, the queen and the ‘evil wife’ of King Ahab of Northern Israel. She was the princess of “Sidon.” Jezebel served Baal and Asherah and spread all the evil influences. Also, she tried to kill Elijah the Prophet, the servant of God, continuously.

What is interesting is that “Zarephath,” the place where Elijah the Prophet stayed briefly, is also a part of “Sidon.” When Elijah stayed there in “Sidon,” during the drought, this poor “widow at Zarephath” experiences a miracle of never running out of flour and the blessing of grace that never dries out continues to be poured onto this place. Not only that, the son of this “widow at Zarephath” was dead
but became alive again through Elijah the Prophet. This “Sidon,” “Syrophoenician” was a place where miraculous history of God occurred in. This place was a very interesting town. “Queen Jezebel” was from this town. Also, God sent Elijah to this town and poured His grace on this “Syrophoenician” town. Even from the time of the Old Testament, God’s grace was not only given to the Israelites, the chosen people, but was given to the foreigners, even if they are sinners. God embraced the with His perfect grace and made this miraculous history possible.

In today’s scripture, in this foreign “Syrophoenician” region, Jesus is giving the “Syrophoenician woman” the same grace that He gave to the “widow at Zarephath” in the past.

However, in today’s scripture, Jesus treats this foreign woman in a nonsense way. The things Jesus says sounds even harsh. Then, let’s look at what Jesus is trying to say through the story of this Syrophoenician woman and what this “great faith” from Jesus’s “Woman, you have great faith!” means.

[Main Sermon]

1. The difficulty of the Syrophoenician woman

First, let’s look at the difficulties the Syrophoenician woman is going through. Let’s look at verse 22.

> 22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” (Matthew 15:22)

The problem that this foreign woman has been going through in the darkness and still could not resolve until she met Jesus is that her “daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” Mark describes her daughter as “little daughter possessed by an impure spirit.” We cannot figure out how little her daughter was, but her little daughter was possessed by an “impure” or “dirty” spirit. Her daughter follows whatever this impure, dirty spirit tells her to do, doing impure, dirty things.

The fact that a mother cannot do anything while watching her little daughter do impure, dirty things made the Syrophoenician woman even more miserable. She probably did all she could for her daughter. The transportation system in Tyre and Sidon was every convenient because Syrophoenician region was a overseas trade city. One could easily move around the Mediterranean Sea coast. Thus, the Syrophoenician woman probably went to all the places for her daughter. Whether it takes a lot of money or how far it is or how much time and effort it requires was not a problem for her as long as her daughter gets healed, lives well, and grow normally into a woman. A “mother” is someone who can do anything for her daughter.

She tried everything she could do, but her daughter is still the same. In the time of today’s scripture, her daughter was likely doing something impure and dirty as usual. However, to her who was living a very miserable life, a good news that Jesus has come to her town arrives. Then, she runs out and cries out to Jesus as loud as she could. “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” Because she “cried out” to Jesus loudly, not just “Lord” or “teacher” or “rabbi” or “prophet,” but she clearly said “Lord, Son of David” to call Jesus herself, Jesus turned to her. She was looking at Jesus desperately and earnestly with the hope of her daughter getting healed by Him. However, Jesus responds like this in verse 23:

> 23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” (Matthew 15:23)
She looked at Him desperately and cried out to Him loudly, but Jesus did not say anything to her and did not even look at her. Even His disciples came to Him and urged Him considering her crying out for a long time to Jesus who is not answering and not looking at her at all.

“Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” The disciples urged Jesus.

Then, Jesus who was not answering the foreign woman turns to His disciples and responds like this in verse 24.

24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Matthew 15:24)

Here, Jesus distinctly separates two groups: “the house of Israel” and “other, or the house of the foreign.” Jesus is also saying that He was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. This statement does not mean that His words point only to the house of Israel. Later on right before when He resurrects and ascends to heaven, Jesus tells His disciples like this in Matthew 28:19-20.

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross and resurrection occurred first among the Jew, then the gospel of God spreads to all nations. Jesus’s gospel first appeared among the Jew and then eventually spreads to foreigners.

In Romans 1:16, Apostle Paul clearly states:

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)

Jesus’s gospel spreads first to the Jew, then to the Gentile, and then to the foreigners. This gospel has not yet met the right time. Jesus has not yet done all things, such as His death at the cross and resurrection, so Jesus said something like that in verse 24:

24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Matthew 15:24)

Thus, this verse does not mean that He is excluding the foreigners, but instead He is saying what needs to occur first. He is talking about the timely order.

His gospel spreads first to the Jew so that the lost sheep could come back. Then, through His disciples, His gospel would spread to the foreigners later on, leading to the return of the lost sheep of all nations.

With Jesus’s purpose, even though His gospel will have a great meaning to all nations later on, Jesus says “No” to the Syrophoenician woman who is desperately bagging Him to heal her daughter who is possessed by an impure spirit.

These obstacles do not stop coming at her.

(1) She has been searching all around the city to find ways to heal her daughter for a long time.
(2) After failing to find ways, she finally meets Jesus, but even though she cries out to Him, He does not answer and does not even look at her.
(3) Then, He only answers His disciples saying that He “only works for the lost sheep of Israel.” The Syrophoenician woman still looks at Jesus who is refusing her.
Even in the continuous difficulties and refusal from Jesus, the woman approaches Him again, because she believes that the only solution is Jesus. This time she kneels before Him in verse 25.

25 The woman came and kneel before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. (Matthew 15:25)

Here, “kneel” in the word of the New Testament is “pros quneo,” which directly translates into “lying down to kiss His feet.” In other verses from the Bible, it is used as “to worship.” This Syrophoenician woman is lying down flat to Jesus and kissing His feet and worshiping Him. She is earnestly asking Jesus to help her. After listening to this desperate woman, Jesus could have healed her daughter, but he says like this in verse 26.

26 He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26)

All this time, He was not even looking at her and not answering her, but now He is saying that “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Again, Jesus says “No” to her request.

What we should not misunderstand from this verse is that Jesus seems to be mocking her by saying “dogs,” but the “dog” is a special word that is only used in the story of the Syrophoenician woman. Also, this “dog” does not just mean a dog in a bad way, but it means a “pet.” Usually “dog” has negative meaning as well as in the Bible. Jesus says this in Matthew 7:6.

6 “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (Matthew 7:6)

The “dogs,” similar to pigs, are animals or people who cannot distinguish the sacredness of God. It is at times used to refer those foreigners who do not know God. Just like this, the expression “dogs” is used in a negative way usually, even in the Bible, but in today’s scripture, Jesus used it to “distinguish” it in a different way.

Thus, the “dogs” in verse 26 does not have a negative meaning at all, but has the meaning of “pet.” Let’s look at verse 26 again.

26 He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” (Matthew 15:26)

This verse is ultimately saying that “the house of Israel comes first” just like it was stated in verse 24. It is saying “What comes first, the timely order.” “It is right to give the bread to the children and is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs first.”

“First to the Jew, then to the Gentile, and then to the foreigners.” Jesus is talking about what should come first, the timely order.

This was the originally set order. However, on the Syrophoenician woman’s side, Jesus refused by saying “No.” Jesus in this verse seems very strange to us. He seems cold-hearted, which looks unfamiliar to us, when He refuses the woman and continues to say “No” every time the woman cries out for help her daughter.

Then, why is Jesus being this harsh to the Syrophoenician woman? In fact, there was a time when Jesus accepted the foreign person’s request. In Matthew 8, Jesus healed the servant as the Roman centurion
asked. That is why it is probably not because she is a foreigner that He is being this harsh to her. Then, why is Jesus being like this to this woman especially?

2. The purpose of Jesus

I would find His real purpose at the beginning of today’s scripture in verse 21.

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. (Matthew 15:21)

The same passage is described in more details in Mark 7:24.

24 Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. (Mark 7:24)

The story of the Syrophoenician woman starts when Jesus leaves and goes to Tyre and Sidon. Just like in the Old Testament where God sent Elijah the Prophet to Zarephath in secret, Jesus secretly went to “Tyre and Sidon.” Based on this, rather than saying that the Syrophoenician woman came to Jesus, Jesus went to where the Syrophoenician woman is actually.

Then, before coming to the foreign Syrophoenician region, the place where Jesus stayed is called “Gennesaret,” the region of the Jew. At that time, in “Gennesaret,” the Pharisees and secretaries came to Jesus saying, “Why aren’t your disciples following the tradition of the elders and eat the food without washing their hands? They are doing wrong things and unfaithful.” Jesus “left the Jew” who were saying that He is wrong and went to the foreign “Syrophoenician” region sincerely, and met the Syrophoenician woman directly.

Jesus is saying this to compare the image of the Jew who did not believe in Jesus at all and the image of the Syrophoenician woman. The Syrophoenician woman is completely different from the Jew. Even in the continuous difficulties and refusal, she continues to believe in Jesus and worships Him. He was clearly showing this image of the Syrophoenician woman to the Israelites at that time and us in this generation.

Thus, I consider the purpose why Jesus was being that harsh to this woman as Jesus really wanted to show the world that she has great faith.

Jesus wanted to show that she is His beloved child who continues to believe in Him and is lying down on His feet to worship Him even though He did not answer her cry and did not even look at her. Hallelujah!

3. The great faith of the Syrophoenician woman

We can figure out specifically what the great faith of this woman that Jesus sincerely acknowledged in her last confession in verse 27.

27 “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” (Matthew 15:27)

In the continuous refusal from Jesus and Him saying that it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs, the first sentence she said regarding His statement was “Yes it is, Lord.”

She is confessing that the Lord is right. Has God ever been wrong? Does God make mistakes? He is never like that. In all parts, God is rights always. This is her confession.
In Gennesaret that was mentioned earlier, the Jew pointed to Jesus that “You are wrong. You made mistakes.” In contrast to the “no faith” of the Jew, the Syrophoenician woman’s confession of “Yes it is, Lord. You are always right” even in continuous difficulties is the great faith of the Syrophoenician woman.

Then, the woman continues saying this:

“**Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.**”

Here, “dogs” mean “pets.”

“Even the puppies eat the crumbs that the children dropped under the table.”

“Just like what Jesus said, she is not the first called Jew and is a foreigner, she knows that she cannot change the timely order that God has planned, but if the crumbs fall, she desperately hopes to eat the crumbs of grace anytime.”

This confession represents the great faith of the Syrophoenician woman.

For us, we usually get angry when we hear “you are not the first” continuously. However, this woman does hold grudge upon Jesus. She does not say “I am first.” She follows the will of God and humbly lies down and asks for the “crumbs” that fall from the table.

I want to call this faith a “Crumb Faith.” If it is the grace of God, even ‘crumbs’ are very precious. Because we know the grace of God, we let go of “ourselves” and lie down on His feet and desperately love receiving even the crumbs according to God’s will. This faith is “Crumb Faith.”

(1) Through the faith of “Yes it is, Lord,” believing that God is always right in any circumstances,
(2) Through “Crumb Faith,” let go of “ourselves” and lie down on His feet, having the faith of desperately loving to receive even the crumbs according to God’s will

To the Syrophoenician woman who has this faith, Jesus finally says this in verse 28:

> 28 Then Jesus said to her, “**Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.**” And her daughter was healed at that moment. (Matthew 15:28)

The foreigners are usually the ones who listen to all the things Jesus says, not the Jew or even His disciples. About the faith of the Roman centurion, in Matthew 8, Jesus says “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” Jesus is also complimenting the Syrophoenician woman, who is also a foreigner, of her great faith.

This image of the Syrophoenician woman who had the faith of believing God is the only one who is always right and of sincerely loving to receive even the crumbs according to God’s will, letting go of “herself” even going through all the difficulties. This faith is what Jesus wanted to show to the world and compliment her saying “You have great faith.” Hallelujah!

[Conclusion]

Dear beloved Hope church members,

Today, we have looked at the great faith of the Syrophoenician woman.
*Faith of the Syrophoenician Woman*

1. “Yes it is, Lord” faith: “God is always right” in any circumstances.

2. “Crumb” faith: humbly love even the “crumbs of grace” letting go of “ourselves” in God.

As we look at her faith, I hope that we can look into our faith inside us.

We are also facing many difficulties. in these difficult times, what confession are we giving to God. As mothers and fathers in families, we did our best. In our workplaces, we did our best. In our church, we did our best to serve. At times we feel like God is not answering us and ignoring us and refusing our request, how does our confession look? Let’s look into ourselves.

Anyways, I pray that all of us can become the true children of God in this generation who receives God’s compliments walking our road of life and just like the Syrophoenician woman, confessing that God is eternally right in all the parts of our life and lying down on His feet and letting go of ourselves with the desperate love of receiving even the crumbs of grace.