

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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O WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH

Matthew 15:21-28

The Lord Jesus has many times rebuked the disciples for their ‘little faith’ (Matthew 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). By contrast, there is one person to whom Jesus said, *Great is your faith*. And this person turns out to be a Gentile. We are told specifically that she is a Canaanite, a term which has inevitable OT associations with the pagan inhabitants of Palestine. You remember that they were to be exterminated by the Israelites because of their moral corruption. And yet, despite her background, Jesus said to her, *O woman, great is your faith!* But what was great about her faith? What does ‘great faith’ mean? This will be the topic of our lesson.

The story of Jesus’ encounter with this Canaanite woman is found in Matthew 15:21-28 (parallel passage: Mark 7:24-30).

*Matthew 15:21. 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 cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed 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 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 fair 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.*

A Gentile woman

O woman, great is your faith! *You know, on Jesus’ words alone, this Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:26) takes a place that is higher than the apostles. Of the twelve apostles, Jesus sometimes said, ‘O men of little faith.’ But of this Canaanite, He said, O woman, great is your faith!*

I believe that in the kingdom of God, near the throne where Jesus sits, there will be sitting there not the twelve apostles, not some famous preachers, not some respectable elders, but some unknown persons like this nameless woman of Canaan. There is an encouragement here to the little ones, the obscure, the unnoticed believers. Because you see, this desperate mother was frankly a person who did not deserve much attention. She was a nobody. Women played practically no role in the Jewish society of that time.

Then, not only was that person a woman, but she was also a Syrophenician, a Canaanite. To be a Gentile was bad enough in the eyes of the Jews. To be a Canaanite was even worse.

And if that was not enough, she had a daughter who was tormented by a demon. What was her family doing that her child was in that condition? Children normally are not demon possessed, unless someone in the family was dabbling in spiritualism. This raises some questions about the moral standing of her family.

So here this desperate woman comes to seek Jesus, hoping to find assistance for her daughter who suffered severely. Given the attitude of the Jews to women and especially to Canaanites, she could hardly have expected anything. That she nonetheless appealed to Jesus already indicates an unusual willingness to challenge social convention.

O Lord, Son of David

Notice that she did not see Jesus simply as some kind of miracle worker. Three times in this passage, she addressed Him as ‘Lord,’ *kyrie*. ‘Lord, have mercy on me.’ ‘Lord, help me.’ ‘Yes, Lord.’ Verses 22, 25, 27.

Was this ‘Lord’ simply a courtesy title that she used to acknowledge Jesus’ social superiority? I don’t think that she was just trying to be polite. Look at v. 22. Not only she addressed Jesus as Lord, but she also addressed Him as the ‘Son of David.’ *O Lord, Son of David!* Anyone who is familiar with the Bible knows that the title ‘Son of David’ is a Jewish title for the Messiah. Amazing. The appeal to Jesus as ‘Son of David’ is striking in the mouth of a Gentile. She clearly had some knowledge of Judaism. Living near to Galilee, she had heard that the Jews expected a Messiah, a son of the great king David, who was to establish an eternal kingdom. God kindled in her heart a true faith in the Messiah. She was convinced that this Jesus, walking around like some ordinary rabbi, was none other than the promised King. And she accepted Him as her Lord.

This woman was able to apply her faith into the situation relating to her daughter. She thought, ‘Since Jesus is the messianic King who will bring salvation, then I can go to Him and say, ‘Lord, Son of David, you are the promised Messiah, the One who brings hope to the hopeless and salvation to the lost. Have regard for my miserable situation. Help me, please.’ And that is exactly what she did.

Persistence despite apparent rejection

Jesus heard the woman’s request but ignored it. He did not speak a word to her (v. 23). This, however, did not dissuade her. She continued to follow after Him and she continued to shout.

The disciples began to be annoyed because her behavior was drawing to them the very attention which they sought to avoid. Jesus did not go to the region of Tyre and Sidon to make Himself public for we read in Mark 7:24 that *when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it*. The disciples therefore urged Jesus to ‘send her away.’ Twelve men could presumably have driven the woman away themselves. Instead they asked Jesus to take action. This suggests that by the words *Send her away*, they meant, ‘Do what she wants, so that she will go away.’

What was implied by Jesus’ silence is put into words in v. 24. *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. This was His calling before His death: first the Jewish people, the house of Israel. The Gentiles would come later. The gospel will be preached to them after His death and resurrection. ‘I was not sent to you,’ Jesus said. ‘I was sent only to those of the house of Israel and you are not of the house of Israel.’

Instead of being discouraged by Jesus' apparent unwillingness to respond to her request, she again implored His help. *Lord, help me* (v. 25). In these three short words, she was saying, 'I don't quite understand what you are talking about when you speak of the limitations of your mission. But I know that you have boundless power. I know that you can heal my daughter. Please, help me.' And notice what she did. She bowed down before Him. Verse 25: *But she came and knelt before him*. Not only she called Him Lord, she worshipped Him as Lord.

After Jesus' initial silence in v. 23 and then the statement concerning His personal ministry in v. 24, now His answer seems to add insult to injury. He said, *It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs*. Jesus made more explicit the restriction stated in v. 24, but He did it by a metaphor which in any culture would be demeaning to those depicted as dogs. Here the dogs are the Gentiles and the children are the Jews. Jesus was saying to the woman, 'You, a non-Jew, a dog, must not demand what God has ordained to His children, to the Jews.'

How did she react to that? 'I didn't expect to hear this kind of language from you. I thought you were better than that. I thought many good things of you. And what do you turn out to be? Just another Jewish narrow-minded bigot!' No, she did not say that. But I think we would have pardoned her if she had done so, wouldn't we?

Her response is disarming. *Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table*. 'Yes, I'm only a dog. But remember one thing, Lord. Even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. Will you spare me a few crumbs?' All she wanted right then was a few crumbs, or one crumb in particular – one miracle of healing for her daughter.

'O woman,' Jesus then said, 'great is your faith. Be it done to you as you wish. Your request is granted.'

Jesus was delighted by the faith of the woman. But in what way was her faith great? Was it because she believed that Jesus could heal her daughter? I don't think so. Remember that crowds came to Jesus to be healed. They believed that He could heal them. Was that great faith? Not necessary. This is certainly not the emphasis of our passage.

Notice this. Three times she was being met with apparent rejection. Yet, she still addressed Jesus three times as Lord. She kept following Him despite His silence, despite His statement about the limits of His mission, despite being called a dog. In that sense, she demonstrated an impressive persistence, a persistence that would not quit.

Becoming one by cleaving

I think we can illustrate the greatness of her faith with one OT word. It is the word 'to cleave,' cleave to the Lord. To cleave to a person means that you don't let that person go no matter what happens. And that, the Canaanite woman certainly did. She held on to the Lord. She refused to let Jesus go until He met her need. That was the remarkable characteristic of her faith. If you have a faith that cleaves, like this woman, then your faith is a great faith.

Now, for the rest of the lesson, I would like to look at the biblical use of this word, to cleave, so that we understand better what it means to have a great faith.

It is used for example in the context of marriage. In Genesis 2:24, we read these well-known words, *For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh*. When do they become one? When the husband leaves his father and his mother, and then he cleaves to his wife. He sticks to her. That's the basic idea.

Genesis 2:24 is quoted three times in the NT (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:8; Ephesians 5:31) and there, the Hebrew term for ‘cleave’ is translated by the Greek word *proskollao*. *Proskollao* comes from the word *kollao* which has the same meaning – to cleave, to glue together, to join one’s self to. This is the term that Paul uses in 1Corinthians 6:17. *But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.* ‘He who cleaves to God.’ Here the word ‘cleave’ is applied to our relationship with God whereas in Genesis 2 it is applied to the relationship between a husband and his wife. He who is joined to the Lord, he who cleaves to the Lord, becomes one with God. It is just like the husband who, having left father and mother, cleaves to his wife. He gives himself completely to her and becomes one with her. In 1Corinthians, the idea of cleaving is that we give ourselves completely to God and become one with Him.

A victorious Christian life

Let’s go back to the OT. When we study the OT, we notice that this ‘cleaving’ is clearly the kind of relationship that God wanted to establish with His people. This is the kind of relationship He wants with you and with me.

Just read Deuteronomy 10:20. *You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cleave to Him, and by His name you shall swear.* We find in this verse what God required of Israel. ‘You shall serve Him and cleave to Him.’ If the Lord is our God, we must faithfully abide with Him, we must cleave to Him as one we love and delight in.

You know what will happen when we cleave to the Lord? Listen to Deuteronomy 11:22-23. *For if you will be careful to do all this commandment which I command you to do, loving the Lord your God, walking in all His ways, and cleaving to Him, then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves.* Notice those words. ‘Then the Lord will drive out all these nations.’ In other words, spiritual victory comes through cleaving to the Lord.

Regarding this point, I have to talk to you about Hezekiah. Hezekiah was unique among the kings of Israel. In 2Kings 18:5, we read that *after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him.* Why was there no king like Hezekiah? The next verse tells us the reason. *For he clung to the Lord.* Here we find again the term ‘to cleave.’ He cleaved to the Lord.

During his reign, a great miracle happened. Assyria wanted to have control of Jerusalem. A letter was sent to Hezekiah personally with an ultimatum to surrender. The Assyrian army was the fear and the dread of the world at that time. It was now near Jerusalem, waiting for Hezekiah to send a message of surrender. What could tiny Israel do in front of an army against which no nation in the world could stand? But notice Hezekiah’s response. In despair, he went to the temple with the letter and engaged in prayer. He asked God to intervene for His glory so that other nations would know that He, the God of Israel, is the true God, and that they would acknowledge His sovereignty (2Kings 19:19). Even though the odds were totally against him, Hezekiah did not give up. He cleaved to the Lord.

The prophet Isaiah responded to Hezekiah’s request with a message of hope from the Lord. God encouraged the king not to fear the Assyrians. He said that their leader would return to his own homeland without even entering Jerusalem. Not one arrow would be drawn against an Israeli soldier. And God did exactly what He promised. In one night, the Assyrian troops were struck down. The angel of the Lord executed 185,000 soldiers. What was left of the army fled, leaving everything behind. They had come face to face with the living God. All that happened because of the prayer of one man, a man who cleaved to God. And this man was Hezekiah. As I mentioned, he who cleaves to the Lord will be victorious in the Christian life.

God's waistcloth

There is a passage in Jeremiah that really speaks to me. And it is the prophetic parable in Jeremiah 13:1-11. Seeing that the people of Israel were not responding to the message of Jeremiah, God had the prophet perform a symbolic act to get their attention. He commanded him to get a linen belt and wear it around his waist. After wearing the belt for a time, God told him to bury it. Then, many days later, the Lord told him to retrieve the belt he had buried. As the prophet dug it up, he found that it had rotted. It was ruined. And God said to Jeremiah, 'In the same way, Israel had become ruined. It is just like this linen belt that you buried by the Euphrates. That's what happens when people refuse to listen to My words.'

But what was the point of this parable? It is this. Jeremiah 13:11. *For as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the Lord; that they might be unto me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory: but they would not hear.* The belt around Jeremiah's waist represented Israel and Judah. God wanted the whole nation to be like a waistband that would stick to Him, that would cleave to Him. 'Cleave to Me,' God said, 'so that you might be for Me a people.' How do we become His people? By becoming God's waistcloth. And not only do we become His people. We also become a name representing God, a praise to God and a glory to God.

This is what the Syrophoenician woman was to Jesus. She was like His waistcloth. She cleaved to Him. In doing so, she became a praise and a glory to God. And what is more, she became part of His people, even though she was a Canaanite.