

The Prayer of One from an Exterminated Race

Proper 15

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Matt. 15:21-28

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God chooses for Himself whom He will. He draws to Himself all who will come to faith in Him. That's what we learn in John chapter 6. Jesus said, "'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.'"

As we confess in the Third Article, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way, He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

In the Old Testament, God made promises to the descendants of Abraham and Isaac. God protected them and led them, giving them His Word and promises time and again. Granted, not all of them kept the faith in Him and His Word.

Today, it is to the Church that God's Word applies—His promises and Words of life and salvation. Yet not everyone in the physical church buildings believe. Nevertheless, God remains faithful to His Word, whether or not those in the church buildings do.

Those outside of the line of Abraham and outside of the Church today are prone to idol worship. This was especially true in the Old Testament. God commanded Joshua and the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites. The Canaanites had been lost in idol worship and their time had come in God's eyes. But Joshua and the Israelites didn't complete the process, and some Canaanites survived to live to Jesus' day.

In our Gospel text, we hear about one of these survivors: a woman, whose daughter was caught up in demon possession.

Verse 1

"Jesus went...to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.'"

Before we get to Jesus' reaction, let's look at just these couple verses. Here we have a woman from Canaan, the land that had been so bad with idol worship they were nearly exterminated. Now we might be tempted to think that it serves her right to have her daughter get possessed by a demon, but our enemies are not flesh and blood. God's problem with the Canaanites was not that they had been more evil than other people but that they had not repented of their sin. That was years before this incident, yet the woman was still a Canaanite and had not become an Israelite.

Despite all these things, look at what this woman said in her plea to Jesus. She said, "Have mercy on me..." The commentary notes say that this is a typical response in a time of trouble. But after that, what did she say? She said, "O Lord, Son of David..." This is a very specific title. It is one that the Jews to whom Jesus was speaking should know, and here this foreigner, this Canaanite woman, knew it.

This is not the first occasion where one from outside God's chosen people had heard of God and His promises. We can also recall Rahab, the woman who had hid Joshua's spies when he was planning to conquer

Jericho. Even though Rahab was not an Israelite, she knew that God was with them. How did she know about God and His dealings with humanity? She knew it from the same place anyone knows it: God's Word.

The Holy Spirit works through God's Word and the spreading of it; and He was most certainly active in bringing not only Rahab, but also this Canaanite woman to hear it. So the woman in our text calls Jesus the "Son of David." And not just as one might address any sons of a father named David, but as the One who was to come from the Davidic line. She knew He was the only person who had the ability to free her daughter from her situation.

Verse 2

"But (Jesus) did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him...(Then) He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'"

Here Jesus does some explaining as to what He's doing. His mission is clear: to be the Shepherd to the sheep, that is, to the Jews. He was not going to make a precedent of helping the Gentiles here, nor does He heal more in the Word we have recorded at this point in time. Jesus thus distinguishes this one time from His mission to the lost sheep of Israel.

But this is not to say that His Word should not or would not reach the Gentiles. It would be passed along by His apostles following Pentecost. And even here, He would grant this woman's request, but only like fathers let pets eat what their children spill. Here, Lenski, a renowned commentator on the Scriptures, draws a distinction among dogs. There were two kinds in Jesus' day: those roaming the streets like those which we hear about licking the poor man's wounds outside the rich man Lazarus' place, and then there were pet dogs, much like we consider pet dogs today. These dogs were permitted to enter the houses and sometimes got scraps from the family table. This is the kind of dog to which Jesus compares the Gentile Canaanites, not the roamers.

Jesus was well aware of His mission and stuck to it. Yet at the same time, He would not deny this mother's request.

Verse 3

"She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

Like Rahab, this woman had heard the Word concerning the God of Israel, and the Son of David, the Savior to come. She knew full well that she was an outsider; but she also knew that her only hope lay in Jesus, her Creator. No one else could help her daughter. And she clung to that truth through the working of the Spirit in her.

To this, Jesus does not refuse her request. He even goes so far as to say that her faith is "great." It was not to all people that Jesus made this statement. But here, to this Canaanite woman, He did.

Do you cling to the faith given you? Do you trust God as your one and only hope? And not just in bad times, but also in the good?

No, when we examine ourselves, we find that there is nothing good in us. Even our best works are nothing but filthy rags. Our salvation, like this woman's, lay outside of ourselves—outside of our power. And, like this woman, our salvation lay with Jesus. He alone is our Lord, our Creator, and our Savior. He alone would go from this woman eventually to the cross. There He would pay for the sins of all people, including yours.

The Holy Spirit works this faith into you and me by the Word of God. It is then through Him that we can rightly say: "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."
In Jesus' Name. Amen.