

Pagan Faith and the Children's Crumbs Mark 7:24

Turn with me to **Mark 7:24-30** as we continue our look at Mark's gospel. This has been a busy time of constant ministry for Jesus and his disciples. Every attempt at getting away in order to rest has been met by needy crowds of people. Attempting again to get alone with his disciples and to get some much needed rest, Jesus travels to the vicinity of Tyre, a Gentile region in part of what the Jews considered ancient Canaan (Matthew's gospel refers to this woman as a Canaanite). Let's read this passage and then make some observations. (Read Mark 7:24-30). In order to gain some additional detail, turn to **Matthew 15:21-28** and let's read his account of this same event.

Syro-Phoenician refers to this area which is now modern Lebanon and Syria. Tyre and Sidon were cities on the coast. While Matthew calls her a Canaanite which would be descriptive enough to a Jewish audience, recalling their long and unpleasant history with Canaan, remember Mark is writing to a Gentile audience. He tells us she is a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia. She is a Gentile pagan from an area that the Old Testament described as godless oppressors of Israel. Remember also that Jesus had just given them a strong teaching about what was clean and what was considered unclean. Now, I think in order to drive home his point, Jesus takes them into the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon into what would be considered the heart of unclean territory and unclean people. In the process I think he manages to teach some important lessons and reveal some important truths about the disciples, this particular lady, Himself, and us. Let's look at this.

About the Disciples (What does this reveal about the disciples?)

Prejudice revealed. After all the lessons he taught them, after the graphic illustrations concerning what was clean and unclean, still the disciples are quick to ignore this woman and her needs. While Mark refers only to the conversation between Jesus and the woman, Matthew tells about the response of the disciples. Matthew 15:23 says **“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.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’”** **Matthew 15:23-24** Really? Everyone tries to figure out why Jesus ignored this woman and seemed to insult her with this statement and again with this parable or illustration about the children's bread and the dogs. It certainly seems out of character for him to insult this lady. Would you like to know my opinion? I think Jesus saw this as another teaching opportunity. It occurs to me that Jesus was exposing

the prejudice of his disciples. Perhaps there was a wink in his eye as he spoke to the mother, and perhaps his tongue was planted firmly in his cheek when he said to the disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

Can’t you hear the disciples saying, “finally, Jesus has come around to see it our way. He is the Jewish Messiah after all. He can’t be going around helping these unclean Gentiles. He came to save the lost sheep of Israel, the chosen people. These people have been our enemies for centuries. They take economic advantage of us, getting rich off of our poverty and God sent Jesus into the world to save us, not them.”

The mother keeps calling after them, perhaps going from one to another, “Please can’t you help my daughter? Please, won’t you speak to Jesus for me?” Jesus ignores her, but maybe he is waiting to see the response of his disciples. What will they do? Will they help this woman?

Do you remember what happened in Mark 6? Well apparently neither did the disciples. Mark 6:7 says “**Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.**” **Mark 6:7.** Does it bother you that the disciples could have offered to help this woman and her daughter, to pray with the mother, to exercise that authority and cast out the demons, but they told Jesus to send her away because she was annoying them.

Prejudice is a terrible thing. It cuts people off from each other and from God. Prejudice, bigotry was going to keep this woman from getting help for her daughter. The disciples apparently didn’t see her as a candidate for their help, their prayers, their intervention. She was ethnically unclean and off their radar screen. “Just get rid of her and let’s move on to the important stuff.” The disciples still didn’t get it, but I think by the time Jesus told his story to this lady and the disciples witnessed her faith, the faith of a pagan (!) – faith in spite of her being ignored and insulted, and they saw Jesus speak the word and deliver her daughter and set her free, in spite of who she was and her ethnicity, I think – I hope they started to understand. He didn’t just come to save Israel, he came to save the whole world! Jesus revealed their prejudice and just how ugly, how selfish, how limiting it can be.

About the Woman (What does this reveal about the woman?)

Desperation revealed. Some scholars believe this woman might have been wealthy, a woman of prominence, but notice the humble attitude of her heart. She falls at Jesus’ feet,

begging and pleading with him to save her daughter. Let me remind you again that this woman is not Jewish, she knows nothing about a Messiah, nothing about the God of Abraham, but she had no doubt heard that he was a miracle worker, that he knew the God that could help her and her daughter and so she cries out to him for mercy and help.

Notice verse 25 says “**As soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet.**” **Mark 6:25** Everything about this woman speaks of desperation. Certainly parents here can identify with this lady. Her child is suffering and there is nothing she can do for her. It is a helpless, hopeless feeling. Whether you are a parent or not, all of us know the feeling of someone you care about being sick or suffering and you have to stand by helplessly and watch. You know something of what she is going through. So when she heard that Jesus was in the area, this miracle worker, she came as soon as she heard.

Matthew’s gospel says she described her daughter’s condition as being one of terrible suffering from demon possession. We can only imagine what was happening to her daughter. Other New Testament accounts of demon possession include the person often falling down or throwing themselves into the fire, trying to kill themselves, insanity like the demoniac of Gedara, tormented. This was the condition of her daughter and this is what brings this woman in desperation to Jesus.

Discerning faith revealed. Amazingly enough, this pagan, Gentile woman gets it. It was desperation that brought her to Jesus but it was discerning faith that opened her eyes and allowed her to see. She understood what the disciples still couldn’t grasp. She understood the ultimate mission of Jesus – that he hadn’t come only for the Jews but instead had come to reconcile the whole world to God.

Look at her response to Jesus’ little parable, his illustration. He tells her that in a family, a household, the children eat before the servants and before the dogs. He implies that the time is not right, it’s too soon. It’s not that there was nothing for her, it’s just that she was on the wrong side of the cross. Right now God’s help is for the Jews, but after the crucifixion and resurrection it will be for all. You can’t take the children’s bread and feed it to the dogs. It’s a crude, rough illustration, but he gets his point across. But so does she! In a surprising response, this pagan lady says, “Yes, but if my daughter and I are the dogs, then even the dogs under the table get to

eat the children's crumbs. That's all I'm asking for. The crumbs will be enough"

You see, the word Jesus used for dogs referred to a house pet. Those puppies under the table belonged and they weren't waiting until the meal was finished and everyone else had all they wanted. No, instead, the children were feeding the dogs under the table the whole time. She realized there was bread available for everyone who comes humbly, in faith, with gratitude to God. She may have been a pagan, but she believed Jesus had some crumbs for her from his table.

This discerning faith of the woman believed that God was for her in spite of her ethnicity. Her faith allowed her to see what his disciples couldn't see, that there was bread enough for the Jews and Gentiles alike. She wouldn't have to wait for another season, a different dispensation, God's provision was available then and now to all who would believe. Jesus said, "**For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.**" **Mark 6:29**

Determined faith revealed. She believed that Jesus had something for folks like her and yet nothing about her circumstances would build up her faith. She has no standing in their society as a woman. She isn't Jewish. She must have wondered how she would even be able to get close to Jesus since she knew the Jews would consider her an unclean person. And then to add to her problems, Jesus completely ignores her. He won't even answer her as she cries out to him. His disciples ignore her and she hears them tell Jesus to just get rid of her. She doesn't belong there.

But desperation kept her going. This lady, this parent would not give up! She refused to be insulted, offended, embittered or put off. Instead of being offended by what Jesus said, essentially implying that she was a dog by comparison to the Jews, she turned it around and used his illustration to prove that she was entitled to his help. **She didn't come arrogantly demanding something, instead she came in faith expecting something!** She came in faith and she went home in faith. It's interesting she didn't demand that Jesus come home with her to deliver her daughter or to verify that all was taken care of. Rather she simply believed Jesus. He said her daughter was delivered and that was it. End of story.

About Jesus (What does this teach us about Jesus?)

He is scandalous at times. You have to take Jesus as he is and sometimes he is rather hard to take. I've explained my opinion about why he ignored this lady and why he told her

about the children's bread and the dogs. I think he was making his point to the disciples and perhaps in some way testing this lady's determination at the same time, but anyway you look at, it sure seems he made it harder rather than easier for her to believe and receive his help. If you ask me, it is still often that way. Faith doesn't always come easily and often there are obstacles to overcome. Most of us would have felt insulted and would have left bitter and upset. "Forget that guy, I'll try something else. This is not what I expected." But you see, this lady was desperate to see her daughter well and whole and she refused to be offended by Jesus. Jesus said, **"And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me."** **Matthew 11:6** This lady knew Jesus was the only hope for her daughter and she would not be put off or offended. Don't let your pride keep you from your miracle. Some of us get offended by his treatment, we feel like Jesus is ignoring us and rather than trying to understand, or trusting there is a reason behind it all, we go in search of a god who will not offend us, a god of our own making, a god who requires little or nothing from us but in the end, a god who can do nothing for us. "Blessed is he who is not offended in me" - who doesn't stumble because of me. What does this reveal about Jesus?

He loves the clean and the unclean. In spite of what seemed to be harsh treatment of this woman, the fact remains he commended her faith and he healed her daughter! Jesus did for her what she believed he would do in spite of the fact she was a Gentile, a pagan. He came not only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he came for all who had gone astray from God. He came that the whole world might be saved through his atoning sacrifice and his amazing grace. He came for you and for me. He came for the upright and for the knocked down and out. He wanted his disciples to see it and he wants his church to live it out. Have we prevented people from coming to Jesus by our prejudice? Our fear? Our lack of love and concern? God loved the world so much he gave his son and Jesus has given us power and authority to go in his name and touch the world, the clean and the unclean. We mustn't allow anything to keep us from fulfilling our mission and our calling as his church to love the clean and the unclean alike.

About Us (Finally, what does this teach us?)

Desperation is a powerful motivator. This woman was desperate. There was no one else to whom she could turn. No one else could help her daughter. We see this often in the Scripture but I wonder if we have too many options available for us to ever be truly desperate. We seldom see ourselves as "out of options". When was the last time you came to Jesus in total

and utter desperation? “You are the only one that can save me or deliver me!” When was the last time you fell at his feet in humility and utter brokenness and cried out to God? Maybe we just haven’t gotten desperate enough, but maybe we will. Maybe circumstances in our world and our nation may force us to a place of desperation where we begin to once again cry out to God as our only hope, our only source. I suggest we begin to cry out now for God’s help, for his salvation, for his deliverance. Let’s put our hope and trust in him. Things are more desperate than we think.

Notice, this woman was desperate about the spiritual condition of her daughter. She was prepared to do whatever it took to get spiritual help for someone she loved. Are you? Are you ready to fight for your children, your parents, your family member, your friends? Are you ready to stay in this fight to the end? Desperation is a powerful motivator.

Faith still moves the heart of God. It was a pagan woman’s faith that moved the heart of God. Because of her faith, evidenced by her response to Jesus, the bible says she went home and found the demon gone and her child lying on the bed, calm, well, whole and free.

This pagan lady can teach us all something about faith and perseverance and allowing desperation to move us. She refused to give up. She would not be offended, instead she kept moving forward in faith. She believed that Jesus had come not just for the Jews, but for the whole world. She believed he had something for her that day, just what she needed, just what her daughter needed. It may seem like crumbs to someone else, but it is just enough for her.

How is your faith today? This woman didn’t know the Scripture, she didn’t know theology, she hadn’t memorized healing verses, she just believed Jesus would help her, that he had something from his table for her. And Jesus has something for you. Come to him in faith, come to him in desperation, come to him believing that faith still moves the heart of God.

Crumbs from the master’s table? I used to preach a sermon by that name when I was young. But the good news for you today is that this time it’s not crumbs from under his table. No, the songwriter said “Jesus has a table spread where the saints of God are fed he invites his chosen people come and dine.” He has prepared a table for you in the presence of your enemies. He has set bread and fish on the fire for you. He has something for you today if you will come to him in humble faith, believing. It’s for you. It’s for you. It’s for you.

But I don’t have enough faith. I bet you’ve got as much as a pagan woman from Canaan.

But I'm not worthy. This lady was a pagan! Believe Jesus and come to him today. Your faith still moves the heart of God. He has something for you from his table. Trust and believe.