

Scenes From the Life Of Christ
Desperate Faith
Matthew 15:21-28
Jim Alexander

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew chapter 15. If you're using one of the pew Bibles there in front of you, turn to page 821. And if you're here today, especially if you're a visitor with us, and you do not yet own a Bible, we would love to give you a copy of God's Word so we invite you to take that Bible as our gift to you from Briarwood so you can continue to grow deep in your faith and in grace. We are looking this morning at Matthew 15: 21-28. You know, over the last several weeks we've been looking at various encounters with Jesus and seeing the different situations in which God orchestrated those encounters in people's lives. As we've done this, for me at least, an overarching truth has become increasingly clear. And that is -- Jesus is always at work. Not only is he always at work, but he is deepening the faith in multiple people at the same time. You see, Jesus is not bound to one person at a time or one place at a time. Even as he works in your life, He works in mine, and he's working in many others. So we're going to find that truth reiterated for us in the passage this morning. Matthew 15, beginning with verse 21, please follow along silently as I read aloud.

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tiro 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. But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, send her away, for she's crying out after us.

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. 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 being done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly.

This is God's holy and inspired Word. Please pay careful attention to it as by his grace and to his glory it is preached for you. Please be seated.

We have a lot to unpack from these few verses this morning, but before we do, I'd like to invite you to think back with me to May 1940, to a time of crisis which called an entire nation to a time of prayer. Nearly 338,000 Allied troops were stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk, France, surrounded on three sides by the German army and blocked on the fourth side by the English Channel. There appeared to be no way of escape. The situation was bleak for those soldiers stranded there on the beach, and seeing that the imminent destruction of a majority, if not all of the United Kingdom's army could happen at any time. The King, King George VI called for a

national day of prayer. In a nationwide broadcast, he called upon the nation to turn back to God in a spirit of repentance, and he urged them to plead for divine help. According to one author I read, millions of people across the British Isles flocked into churches praying for deliverance and two events immediately followed. First, a violent storm arose over the Dunkirk region, grounding the Luftwaffe, which had been killing thousands on the beaches. And second, a great calm descended on the channel, the likes of which hadn't been seen for a generation. This allowed hundreds of private boats to cross the channel and assist the Royal Navy in rescuing 335,000 soldiers, rather than merely rescuing what they hoped might be 20 to 40,000. From that moment on, people have referred to this event as the Miracle of Dunkirk. A desperate situation drove a King and a nation to God in desperate faith. In our passage this morning, I think we see a woman facing a desperate situation of her own that likewise is driving her to desperate faith in Jesus Christ. But not only is it driving her in deeper faith to Jesus, but the disciples are there with Jesus and Jesus is going to use this event also to broaden their faith as he helps this woman. Verse 21 begins simply with Matthew giving us something of a setting in this setting. He said, *Jesus went away from there and he withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.* We might just pass over that if we didn't have a little color commentary to help make that make sense.

In the background, if we were to look earlier in the chapter, we would see Jesus has recently been in the regions of Nazareth and Capernaum. While there, he's been teaching, and he's been doing multiple miracles. And yet, while there in Capernaum, his reception was something of less than what we might have expected. To the people of Capernaum, he was just the miracle worker. They failed to see him for who he was, and even while they were failing to see him for who he was, Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem had come, and they were starting to bring up opposition to Jesus. So, the Scribes and Pharisees come from Jerusalem, and they accuse Jesus of being derelict in duty. How can you, as a rabbi, allow your disciples to eat without first washing their hands?

Now, for all of you physicians in here, this is more than just a reference to good hygiene. They were actually accusing Jesus of not honoring the Pharisee law. How can you let your disciples not keep the law? Well, Jesus countered this accusation by getting to the heart of the matter. He said, it's not what goes into the mouth which makes someone unclean. Rather, it's what comes out of the mouth which reveals the inner condition of an unclean heart. He then went on to expose the uncleanness of their hearts by listing specific sins -- murder, adultery, theft, bearing false witness, slander. He pointed to the Ten Commandments to make sure that they understood. Keeping man's added law was nothing in comparison to breaking God's eternal law. Heated confrontations like these continued, and opposition rose to the place of the leaders plotting, trying to find a way that they could shut Jesus up and silence his ministry forever. So now Matthew tells us in that context, Jesus withdrew. He left from the region of Nazareth and Capernaum, where the Jews lived and he goes deliberately some 50 miles north to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He goes into Gentile territory. He leaves into a decidedly unclean land. The contrast could be much more clear. The Pharisees were all worked up about a little ritual about

washing their hands and Jesus said, that's not going to make your cleaner unclean. I'm going to walk all the way up here some 50 miles, and I'm going right into the heart of what you think is far from clean.

Well, it's not the first time that we've seen Jesus withdraw. He would rule repeatedly, at times to be away and alone with his father in order to pray. He also withdrew from the crowds who, mistaking why he came, wanted to take him by force and make him become their king. And now here he withdraws to these Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, in order to defuse the tension that is rising because his time had not yet come. So, he withdrew into this region. Two cities of great commerce, two cities of government, and two cities which stood for great degradation, pagan beliefs and corruption. Yet it's here that we find Jesus not having to try to convince an audience that he is the Messiah and that he is the one who came to actually make hearts clean. Instead, we find a Gentile woman who already is acknowledging something of who he is when she says, O Lord, Son of David. She recognizes that this could be the Messiah, the one who can meet her need. So I want us just to look at, for a couple of moments, how Jesus now takes the desperation -- the desperate circumstance that this woman is facing and uses that situation to deepen her faith.

In verse 22, again we're told, *behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying out, have mercy on me, O Lord, son of David. My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.* I think, even by the way that Matthew writes he's letting us know how shocking this really was to the disciples there with Jesus. We simply read in English and behold, but he could just as easily have written, Can you believe it? Here we've been with Jesus, trying to do ministry all these days in Capernaum and Nazareth, and we've been being rejected. Now we've walked all these miles, and we're here in the heart of Gentile territory and yet no more ministry demands or before us. This was a shocking thing to those who were following Jesus.

Even more so because in this one verse we find that the woman is called a Canaanite. Do you know that's the only time and all the New Testament you find that word Canaanite? Oh, we know a lot about the Canaanites. We can trace it all the way back to Genesis 9. Canaan, son of Ham, was cursed after him, seeing the nakedness of his father. Noah didn't cover him, but instead made sport of him. And Canaan the son was cursed.

We can trace it further in the Old Testament, over and over, Israel repeatedly was told, do not marry. Do not intermarry with anyone that's a Canaanite. Likewise, they also were told throughout the Old Testament, when you settle the land, when Joshua takes you in and you settle the land, drive out all the Canaanites.

Yet here in our passage this morning is a Canaanite woman boldly approaching Jesus, the Jewish Rabbi. She came out of Tyre and Sidon, and again she kept demanding with a loud voice. Literally, that's what the original language tells us. Repeatedly, over and over and over, she keeps crying out louder and louder until it's elevated nearly to the point of a scream. Jesus, Master. Son of David. My daughter is severely oppressed. Have mercy on us.

Others have said similar things to Jesus before blind Bartimaeus, two groups of men who were likewise blind. They each said, have mercy on us, son of David. Similarly, the ten lepers who came to Jesus cried out, Jesus, master, have mercy on us! And even last Sunday, Pastor Doriani walked us through a passage in which a father, seeking mercy for his demon possessed son threw himself to Jesus for mercy and for his help.

So this woman's cry, Lord, have mercy on me, son of David, was a plea for Jesus to take pity on her. It seems he had already heard something of Jesus, because when he comes into their region, that area where he had not been, she recognizes and goes to him, and she goes to him for mercy. I think recognizing his authority and even his rightful rule as a Jewish king.

And while it may be difficult to really assess her faith at this particular moment, I think there are several characteristics of her faith that we can see. She came to Jesus humbly. She approached him with reverence, speaking to him with great respect. Further, her faith is compelled by the agony and the distress that she is facing, and she is compelled by the love she has for her little daughter, who is severely oppressed by a demon. She came boldly to Jesus, even without giving a thought to what others might think about her as she approached him as a woman.

Now for us this morning, in light of all the other encounters with Jesus that we've already studied, we might expect that verse 23 would read something like that. And Jesus, seeing her need and hearing her cries, immediately took care of her need. But that's not what it says. Look again in verse 23. Matthew tells us, but Jesus did not answer her a word. Regarding the silence, the word became flesh to dwell among us, remained silent while this woman shouted for help. In response to Jesus' silence and to her continuous crying out, the disciples were the first to speak. His disciples, we are told, came, and they begged him, saying, send her away. For she is crying out after us. As some tend to believe that the disciples merely were annoyed, it would be annoying. This woman is getting louder and louder. She is following them. She is constantly crying out have mercy on me, have mercy on me, have mercy on me. And they're annoyed. They're put out with her, her troublesome ways. But I think others rightfully point out there is more than just this. They weren't just asking Jesus to dismiss this woman and send her on the way which I believe because of what he says in the next verse. They're actually asking him. Please answer her. Please heal her daughter. And then she'll go away. Now, why do I think that's more likely the case? Look at what Jesus says to his disciples after they have now spoken to him repeatedly themselves.

Verse 24, he answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. No longer remaining silent, Jesus now restates his mission. He looks at the disciples. And that's why I think that he understood. They wanted him to actually do something for this woman. They'd seen him do things for Gentiles before. Gentiles had come to him multiple times, and he'd healed them, and he'd given them faith. So, their question implied in this plea was, what's different now? Why are you not willing to do something for this woman who so annoyingly and keeps pestering us and following us everywhere we go? And Jesus answers them by taking him back to his mission. He says, God didn't send me to the Gentiles, yet God sent me primarily to the Jews.

So, he points them to the real difference here, the real difference here. When Jesus helped Gentiles before, he always helped Gentiles who came to him as he was ministering within the boundaries of Israel. But this is the first time, and I believe the only time that Matthew lets us see Jesus going miles out of his way, deep into the heart of Gentile territory, to meet the need of a Gentile who is there.

So, Jesus says to the disciples, that's not my mission. My mission from God is to come and reach those who, being Israelites like me, need to see that I am the Messiah. They need to understand that I am the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to the father is to come through me. My primary focus is to a Jew. We're hearing the words that Jesus has just said to his disciples. The woman now speaks, and you can almost see or feel this increased sense of urgency in her voice and desperation, because she comes and she kneels before Jesus, saying simply, Lord, help me. She comes in the posture of a beggar. Now the one coming as a beggar but coming as one who might be seen as a worshipper. And she utters the three most necessary words that anyone can say when facing a crisis, in a desperate situation, or for that matter, the three most important words we can ever say at any given day at a moment in our lives, she says, Lord, help me. Well, a power packed statement, because when we say, Lord, we are saying there is a God and He is Almighty, he is all powerful. God is God and I am not. And when we say, Lord, help me, we are also admitting that there are things that I can't do for myself. When we fly to the Lord, we ask the Lord to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves by submitting ourselves to his authority, even as this woman just did.

So now Jesus speaks clearly after she pleads, Lord, help me. He speaks directly to the woman, but actually in a way we might not expect. In verse 26, Jesus answered her, it's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. How easily this woman could have taken offense. She could have looked at him, says, look, I came to you for help. I believe that you're a king of Israel, and as a king, you're merciful. And I believed you could actually do something to help me in my cause. How dare you insult me in such a way?

How many even today might look at Jesus' reply, bogged themselves down trying to attribute to Jesus the sinful motives of man, rather than seeing in Jesus the pure, redeeming love of Christ. So Jesus wasn't referring to this woman as a dog, either directly or indirectly. He wasn't lowering himself, stooping to be on the level of the Jews of the day who would refer to all Gentiles as dogs. You know, sort of a racial slur. Jesus is simply putting out an analogy. This analogy is designed to make his point about the priority of the ministry that God had given him. He likens the gospel message of salvation through faith in the Messiah to a meal prepared for the family, and as he does so, he says, would it be right? Or who in their right mind would prepare this fabulous meal for their family and rather than feeding. It's ludicrous to think that he would behave that way.

The emphasis of verse 26, I think, is rightly placed not on the word dog, but on the children's bread. Jesus was actually trying to help this woman understand as well as the disciples who are watching. Never forget that they're part of this drama that we're seeing unfold. Jesus is helping

them see that the bread for the children is the fact that he is the Jewish Messiah, long awaited, prophesied, foretold. He is now there in flesh, and the ministry is to take the bread to the children, not giving it to the dogs.

I think even Jesus, in teaching his disciples, Paul reaffirming what he taught the disciples understood this well. They understood that the gospel was go to the Jew first, then also to the Greeks or the Gentiles. Jesus had been sent to a particular place in a particular time for a particular task. For now the gospel was to go to the Jews. Later it would go to the Gentile. Well, the woman, still undeterred and yet humble in her response, simply replies in verse 27, yes, Lord. Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

I don't know how it is in your house, and I don't know if you have a dog or not, and how you let your dog act around your table. But I know some happy dogs in our family because I've got five grandsons. And those five grandsons, as they learned how to kind of feed themselves, were rather messy. And these dogs were rather happy recipients of the mess that they made, because ample amounts of food will get dumped from the table onto the floor, and the dog would eagerly clean it up. These dogs were well fed on their own. They had their own food, but boy, they became tight friends with these grandsons who would give them the table scraps.

But you know, I don't think that the Canaanite woman was asking even for this. She understood what Jesus was saying. Far from pushing back. She agrees with the fact that she, being a Gentile, lay beyond the scope of Jesus primary mission. She doesn't defend herself. She doesn't try to prove Jesus wrong. She doesn't try to talk him, convince him against his will, to do something he wasn't sent to do. Yet she persists. She takes the very words of Jesus and furthers her dialog with him. She's not coveting. She's not demanding the full meal which was prepared for the children. She would be satisfied with just the crumbs. That's all she would need. It would be food, enough to meet her need. So desperate for her daughter to be healed, she was still relentless, and she waited on the Lord to do for her what she could not do for herself. I think she displayed what we already declared together this morning, as we responsively read from Isaiah chapter 40 verses. Those who wait on the Lord, those who actively go to him again and again and again, asking him to do for them what they can't do for themselves. Those who wait on the Lord actively like that are the ones who will not grow weary as they run. They're the ones who will not faint when their faith feels more like a long, slow slog.

Jesus now turns to this woman in verse 28 it says, A woman. Great is your faith. Be a done for you as you desire. And immediately her daughter was healed. I think there's tenderness in his answer. There's compassion in his voice. The very phraseology. Oh, woman, is a term of endearment. He is not putting her off. He is inviting her in. And this woman receives even more than she asked for. She was only asking for her daughter's sake. Please do something to release her from the oppression of those demons. But Jesus gives her more than that. He gives her a permanent record, a testimony to her faith. In front of his disciples at that moment, in front of us, still today, he says, great is your faith.

Well, in contrast to the disciples who are watching this all unfold, whom Jesus often said, oh ye of little faith to now this woman gets an accolade almost like none other. Great is your faith. A Gentile, a pagan. A woman with great faith. I think that leaves us in a good position now to turn from what Jesus is doing. A by the way, Jesus, why, when you think about why did he not answer her right away? He could have. It begs the question, Doesn't Jesus? Why? Why did you wait, wait, wait. Jesus was not only teaching her, but also the disciples. And as he's teaching her, what is he doing? But he's drawing out of her the depth of her faith. Did Jesus already know the strength of her faith? Of course he did. Who needed to know the strength of her faith? The woman did so. Jesus takes time. He delays. He draws out of her by silence, by a rebuff, and by answering her prayer, he lets her find out how deep is her faith. but he's also using this same exact scenario, this same desperate situation of the woman to teach the disciples and to broaden their faith. You know, throughout this dialog, they've been there, they've been watching, they've been listening, they've been interacting. And the disciples, though they may not have realized it at the time, were actually being challenged as to the quality of their faith. See, already their hearts true condition was made clear out of the abundance of the heart. The mouth speaks. What did their mouth speak? Jesus, get rid of her. She's too annoying. To them. Here was a woman. And that culture today. This is not right, ladies. Don't get mad at me. This is just how it was back then. A woman was not considered anything more than property. That's wrong. But that's how the disciples would have thought. She's a woman and she's a Gentile. She's a Canaanite of all things. Well, the Canaanites were the arch enemies of all the Jews. Over decades and decades and centuries they had learned to despise the Canaanites, even to hate them. A woman, a Canaanite, with a daughter who is demon possessed. And then their thinking. Remember the blind man, and they see him on the side of the road. Jesus, whose fault was it that this man was born blind? Right away they want to attribute fault and blame, not help the woman out. Now, if the good old American pastime of baseball had been invented back then, you might have heard these disciples say, three strikes, sister, you're out. They didn't want anything to do with her. but Jesus saw in this woman the beauty of the reflection of the glory of God. He saw in this woman the image of God, the creator. He saw in this woman someone he loved and whom he was drawing to himself. Here was a Gentile, someone who, by his sovereign plan, was born outside of the Jewish, family. And yet she would be part of those people to whom the gospel door would soon be thrown open wide. And here was a mother whose love for her daughter would not be denied.

So in contrast to the Scribes and Pharisees back in Capernaum, in Nazareth, who had no faith, and in comparison with the disciples following Jesus, who so often addressed by were addressed by him as, oh ye of little faith. Here is a woman, Canaanite, mother of a possessed daughter, that Jesus says, great is your faith. What is Jesus showing the disciples? I think he's actually trying to pry their eyes open. He's trying to peel away the onion of their thinking. Yes, he had told them, go only to the Jews, but soon he was going to be sending them to Jerusalem and Samaria, and Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the uttermost parts of the earth.

And Paul would understand that there is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, neither bond nor free. Jesus was showing them, even now, by taking them all the way up into Gentile territory, and by letting the crumbs of the table from the master fall draped right down to this woman in desperate need, and take care of her crises. He is showing them the gospel will go to all. For the moment it's for the Jew. But soon these men would be disabused of their racial prejudices, and they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit. And they would go to literally all the world. And they would not only love the outcasts, but they would love Jesus so much that they would willingly become martyrs for him. And the kingdom of heaven advanced.

Now, to tie all this together, let's just take a minute. Let's talk about some ways that Jesus is still using the example of this woman to teach his disciples here in this auditorium today. In other words, what are the principles that we can learn from both the Canaanite woman and the disciples in this situation, in this particular encounter with Jesus? What can we apply to our lives today?

Well, first, I do think it's important for us to be reminded and reminded often that Jesus is always working, not only using, but actually ordaining the crises you face to increase our desperation for him. I don't know what all of you are facing this morning. I know what some of you have faced because I have been interceding for you. Lifting you up before the throne in faith. Going to the father on your behalf. But whatever it is that you're facing this morning, would you please remember that it has been sent into your life as part of God's perfect plan and in his perfect plan? You know what God loves to do. He loves to strip us of our self-sufficiency and make us more desperate for him. For some here this morning, my prayer would simply be whatever the hard is that you're going through in your life, God would use that hard to draw you to himself in saving faith. We read that verse from Isaiah. Those who wait on the Lord shall mount up with wings as eagles. They should renew their strength. They should run and not grow weary. They shall walk and not faint.

You can't even begin to find in Jesus the source of your strength, unless you surrender everything first to him. So my prayer is today would be the day that by the work of the Holy Spirit, you would see your need of Jesus Christ and that he is Savior for you, for others, as you face those unrelenting circumstances and uncertainties in your life. And it seems like Jesus answer to your cries just are never going to come. Would you keep crying out listening for his response, knowing that he is good? He may be putting you through the wringer of a very difficult situation, only to show you how deep your faith is. So genuine faith refuses to falter. Faith perseveres. What may feel to you like you just have such little faith may prove someday soon to be great faith.

As you follow Jesus full on. Perhaps for some you've been watching a loved one. You've been watching your friend. You've been watching them go through the heart and and you're trying to just sort it all out. But you know what you're also doing? You're watching them as they remain faithful, become sermons and shoes. They're living in a way before you that they're also encouraging you and challenging you to keep pressing on. Maybe they're also watching you. Can

you do the same for them? Can we lift each other up by our faithfulness, by our implicit and explicit trust in Jesus Christ alone? And probably for us all, like the disciples, we need to see how the love of Jesus tears down social barriers, helps us lean against the tide of the cultural mores of the day, and take the gospel to all. I think Jesus wants to see everyone is made in his image. Everyone has great worth.

Rather than finding all kinds of excusing ways to marginalize and exclude someone. Shouldn't we be inviting in them all? We exclude people because of their gender. We exclude people because of their status. Maybe as a refugee we exclude them for their ethnicity or the fact that they're impoverished and homeless. The list goes on and on and on. And it really only shows our own selfishness as we try to say, I'm in, but you're out. I think we need Jesus to increase our desperation. We need him to make us so desperate for him that when we find we've only got faith the size of that mustard seed, when he sees that faith, he moves mountains so that people can know peace with God. Through Jesus Christ the Son.

Father, I do ask that you would help us.

There's so much more we could have spent time on this morning. But I ask, Lord, by your grace and to your glory, you'll take what was said and encourage us. Because, Lord, we're actually encountering you with every encounter we study every week. We're part of those who are encountering Jesus as we open your word and Lord, we are disciples just like your disciples who so many times miss what it is you have for us to see.

Please open our eyes that we might behold the wondrous truths that you have for us, not only in Your word, but in our lives and through our lives. Lord, would you let us love and live redemptive to one another? Let us put aside any division that would take away from the from the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and then let us go boldly to those areas where we wouldn't normally go, knowing that there are someone out there made in the image of God, looking to be restored to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Let us go with the gospel in faith, believing and let us see people restored to intimate relationship with you through Jesus Christ the Son. It is in his name that we pray and we ask it.

Amen.