

## **“Sola Fides”**

**Matthew 15:21-28**

**September 30, 2018**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Today’s passage is a story about faith. More accurately, it’s a story about great faith, an evaluation given by Jesus himself as he commended the Canaanite woman who came to him. **“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire”** (v. 28).

As I indicated last week, Matthew 15 and 16 are about the four *solas* of the Protestant Reformation. That little Latin word, meaning “alone,” is a key theological word, indicating that we must be careful not to add anything to the key components of our salvation. Those key components that are paired with the word “alone” are Scripture, faith, grace and Christ. We looked last week at Scripture alone. Scripture, not human tradition, is to be our only standard for faith and for life. Today, we are looking at faith alone. We believe in salvation by faith alone, apart from works.

The lesson about this kind of faith comes with a surprise. The one who exhibits this commendable faith is a Canaanite woman, a Gentile. Jesus and his disciples had left the borders of Israel and find themselves in Gentile territory in the district of Tyre and Sidon. It seems that they encounter her while on vacation, indicated by Matthew’s word “withdrew.” They were withdrawing for a time from active ministry for the purpose of a much-needed rest. Mark adds in his account of this event that Jesus **“did not want anyone to know”** where he was (Mark 7:24). Despite his best efforts, she found Jesus and would not take no for an answer. The Jewish leaders, who had the benefit of knowing the Old Testament, missed the truth about Jesus, while this Canaanite woman ends up being an illustration of great faith.

The Bible teaches that we can never please God apart from faith (Heb. 11:6). Faith, not works, opens the door to heaven and to all heavenly blessings. So let’s look more carefully at the kind of faith Jesus commends as great.

### **I. Great Persistence**

This is a desperate woman. Her daughter is oppressed by a demon. We’re not told of the effects of this oppression, but demons always destroy and dehumanize. There is a description of a demon’s effect on a young boy in Matthew 17. We read that he was suffering terribly, afflicted by the demon with some kind of seizure that would throw him alternately into the fire or into

water (17:15). She had somehow heard of Jesus and now discovers that he has come to her town.

We can see her desperation throughout the passage. We hear it in her voice, as she was “crying” out for help. The word indicates loud shouting. And it’s in the imperfect tense, which means that it was a repeated action. The mere fact that she would approach a group of Jewish men with this request also indicates her desperation. It was unusual for men and women to speak to one another in public, all the more so for a Jewish man to speak to a Gentile woman. There was a strict sect in Israel at this time called “The Bruised and Bleeding Pharisees.” They were given this name because every time they saw a woman they covered their eyes, and thus bumped into whatever happened to be about.

Her desperation gave rise to persistence. She approaches Jesus and presents her need to him. **“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon”** (v. 22). She calls him the “Son of David,” a title describing the Messiah. Unlike the Jewish leadership, she knows who Jesus is. Normally, when people come to Jesus with such desperate need and with such faith, he is quick to respond with the requested help. That makes his response to this woman all the more curious. He ignores her, a response worse than saying “No” because it makes a person feel invisible, like they don’t register enough even to be given a response. She can’t comfort herself by thinking that Jesus didn’t hear her, because she is shouting repeatedly at him. Still, Jesus is curiously silent.

The first ones to speak, other than the woman, are the disciples. But their response gives her no comfort. **“Send her away, for she is crying out after us.”** The disciples, too, are puzzled by Jesus’ silence. They want him to do something, not for the woman’s sake, but for their own. They are put out by her constant, desperate and loud pleas for help, and they want it to stop. After all, they are here on vacation, precisely to get away from people like her. It’s not entirely clear what they want Jesus to do to get rid of her. Do they want him to give her what she wants or just to send her away with a clear refusal of help?

Jesus then speaks for the first time. **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** That’s a pretty clear refusal. Jesus is telling her that he has been given a mission and it doesn’t include anyone outside of Israel. So we’ve gone from Jesus ignoring her to Jesus refusing her. But this woman will not take “No” for an answer. She adopts a posture of worship, kneeling before Jesus, and utters the simplest of prayers. **“Lord, help me.”** Again, Jesus responds with words of refusal. **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** Even through this refusal, she persists, using Jesus’ own words to make her case. **“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”** With this, Jesus strongly commends her for her faith and grants her request.

Why is Jesus so reluctant to help her? One commentator, Frederick Bruner, says that this is an example of Jesus' learning by the things he suffered (Heb. 5:8). Jesus had to learn about the Father's mission to the Gentiles. He bases that conclusion on the fact that Jesus had earlier restricted the mission of the disciples to Jews only (10:5). The problem I have with this as an explanation for Jesus' reluctance to help this woman is that this is not the first time Jesus healed a Gentile. He healed a centurion's servant back in chapter 8. What's more, Jesus was based in Galilee, which was sometimes referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15) because of the large number of Gentiles living there. It is highly likely among the many healings Jesus did in Galilee that many Gentiles were the beneficiaries.

Why, then, the reluctance of Jesus to help her? I must confess that I'm not sure. What I do know is that faith looks the same for us as it did for her. That is, when we come to God in prayer, asking for his help, it is not uncommon for that help to be long-delayed. Faith keeps coming to God in prayer, overcoming the long delay. It also at times must overcome the behavior of Jesus' disciples, as was the case here. I have known too many who have given up on God because of the selfish behavior of his followers.

Matthew didn't include this story just because it was an interesting story. He did so for our benefit. We must have the same kind of faith we see in her, persisting in coming to Jesus, overcoming both delays and disciples. We persist because we are desperate and because we know there is no possibility of help outside of Jesus. That brings us to our next point.

## II. Great Jesus

The Canaanite woman had only one hope, and that was for Jesus to help her. She had no Plan B. Faith never has a Plan B because when Jesus is your Plan A, it is always enough. The statement Jesus affirms as demonstrating the greatness of her faith is her last one. **"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."** Her faith was great because it was focused on a great Jesus. Note that she believed that just the crumbs from Jesus would be sufficient. Her faith was great because her Jesus was great.

There is another way in which her statement about the dogs eating the crumbs evidences a big Jesus. She humbled herself to accept the words of Jesus. Jesus was the one who first brought up the language of the dogs, speaking of the impropriety of giving to the dogs the bread intended for the children of the household. Instead of taking offense at this, the Canaanite woman accepted Jesus' humbling characterization of her lower status and used it in her appeal to Jesus. Before she heard the words she had been longing to hear—"Be it done for you as you desire"—she received the words

that were harder to hear. Faith humbly receives all the words of Jesus. We love to hear the words of Jesus' love and forgiveness, and those are indeed lovely words. But faith requires receiving all of Jesus' words, because of the greatness of the one speaking them. We must receive his hard words of repentance, of judgment, of surrender of our lives to him. Faith doesn't get to pick and choose the words we want from Jesus.

There is a well-known story in the Old Testament about this. 2 Kings 5 tells the story of Naaman, commander of the Syrian army. He was a leper and heard from a young Israelite slave girl that there was a prophet in Israel to whom God had given the power to heal such diseases as leprosy. So Naaman went to Elisha for healing. When Elisha heard that he was coming, he sent word to him to wash himself in the Jordan seven times. Naaman took offense at this, thinking that the rivers of Syria were far superior to the Jordan. So he refused to do so. His servants finally prevailed upon him to humble himself and wash in the Jordan, as Elisha had directed. He did so and was healed.

Similarly, faith for us will require submission to all of Jesus' words. That will require the humbling of repentance and of the full surrender of our lives to God. At the same time that Jesus' words are given a prominent place in our hearts, our own words become more spare. Note the simple words she speaks in verse 25: **"Lord, help me."** It is often the case that multiplied words are an indication of unbelief and few words of faith. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who both go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prays this long prayer ending with a boast: **"I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."** But the tax collector has a short prayer: **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"** (Luke 18:13).

### III. Great Results

The final sentence of our passage gives the results: **"And her daughter was healed instantly."** I can imagine what it was like for her to return home to find her daughter calm and peaceful, untroubled by the demon. It was just as Jesus had said it would be. The woman had been right when she said that only a crumb from Jesus would be sufficient to give her daughter release from the cruel demon.

Let me point out just a couple of things about this good result. First, the woman's faith led to a good result for her daughter. In the same way, your faith can bring good not just to yourself, but to those you love as well. Parents, don't stop praying for your wayward children. Even if it seems at first that Jesus is unresponsive to your appeals, don't give up. Even if Jesus' disciples are not being helpful, don't give up. I don't know why Jesus is sometimes long in answering these prayers. It is not for us to know his time and his way. But it is for us to keep praying in faith, as this woman did.

Faith in Jesus results in abundant life for us just as it did for this Canaanite mother. Ben Ellis, a beloved teacher in Christ Presbyterian Academy in Nashville, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. One day, the administrators at the school decided to take the entire student body to his house to worship with him. More than 400 students stood outside and sang worship songs with him. After a video of the event went viral and reached over twenty million views, Good Morning America featured a story about it that aired nationally. The Headmaster of the school asked Ben Ellis if he had a message to give to the students gathered outside his house. "Tell them that it's all true," he said.

What did he mean? He meant that all the promises God has given to us in Christ are true. There is everlasting joy for God's children. As the hymn says that we are going to close with today, "No chilling winds nor poisonous breath can reach that healthful shore; Sickness, sorrow, pain and death, are felt and feared no more. I am bound, I am bound, I am bound for the Promised Land." All the "happily-ever-after" fairy tales are true. Cinderella marries the prince in the end. Beauty kisses the beast and he is returned to royalty. The dragon is slain to kill no more.

I like the way C. S. Lewis words this in *The Great Divorce*. "That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of temporal suffering, 'no future bliss can make up for it,' not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory."

## **CONCLUSION:**

Faith attaches itself to Jesus and won't let go, just like this woman did. It persists, no matter how long it takes, until it receives the promise. It receives the full word of Jesus and humbly submits to that. It is faith by itself in Jesus only. And we have the privilege this morning of celebrating these truths about Jesus in the Lord's Supper.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Matthew 15:21-28**

1. The Canaanite woman who came to Jesus was desperate because of her daughter's condition. Describe a time in your life when you experienced a type of desperation. If you were married and have children, perhaps it was a need relating to your children.
2. What do you think is the difference between the kind of desperation that leads to faith and the kind that leads to despair?
3. Jesus at first seems reluctant to help her, not even responding to her initial appeal. Is there something for which you have prayed long and hard and are still awaiting a reply from God?
4. Her faith overcame the selfish behavior of the disciples, who wanted Jesus to send her away so she could no longer bother them. Have you known people who have turned away from God because of the poor behavior of people in the church? What advice would you give to such people?
5. Jesus gives her a hard word before he gives her a good word. The hard word is in verse 26: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." The good word is in verse 28: "Be it done for you as you desire." She received both words, teaching us that faith submits to all of Jesus' words, the hard ones as well as the good ones. What are some hard words from Jesus that we need to hear today?
6. The Canaanite woman's faith benefited her daughter. When we call out to Jesus in prayer, others benefit. Can you think of some things that are at stake if the church fails to pray? Is there some step God is calling you to take in your prayer life in light of this?
7. In the end, the woman received the benefits she sought. We always will in the end too. Ben Ellis, the Nashville teacher in the sermon illustration who died of cancer, said to tell his students, "It's all true." Which of God's still unrealized promises to us are you most looking forward to seeing realized?