**The great faith of a ‘dog’**

Text: Mark 7:24-30

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 42:1-9; Luke 18:1-8; Mark 7:24-30

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘By Faith’, 468, 40, 467, 67

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#20)

**Theme:**  The encounter of Jesus with a needy Gentile woman, who despite Christ’s seeming reluctance to help her, demonstrates remarkable faith in Him with the result that her daughter was healed.

**Proposition:**  Proven faith in the Lord Jesus Christ results in great blessing.

**Introduction**

Do you like dogs? Some of us do and others do not. However, we are all familiar with domestic dogs to some extent. Some are well-groomed, well-fed and well-behaved. Others less so. When Jenny and I were ministering in the Aboriginal camps in Australia, the people there would refer to ‘cheeky dogs’ – they roamed free, were usually skinny, often carried disease and not infrequently would bite people.

In Bible times, some canines ran stray in the streets (e.g. 1 Kings 14:11; 21:24), but some were ‘four legged friends’ serving as watchdogs (Isa 56:10; Job 30:1). In Bible times, to call someone a ‘dog’ was a term of contempt (e.g. 1 Sam 17:43; Ps 22:16; 20; Rev 22:15). Remember Jesus said, ‘*Do not give to dogs what is holy*’ (Matt 7:6). Paul insulted his Judaising opponents, referring to them as ‘dogs’ (Phil 3:2). To call someone a ‘dog’ in Bible times was to use a demeaning, derogatory term. It isn’t so different now. Would you be comfortable if someone called you a ‘dog’?

In our earlier reading from Isaiah 42 (also quoted in Matt 12:20), we heard a prophesy about the promised Spirit-filled Messiah: “*a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench*” (v3). A reed is a tall slender-leaved plant which grows in water or in marshy ground. The hollow stem of a reed was used by shepherds to make a simple flute to calm and to call sheep. Reeds are used today in some musical instruments such as the clarinet, saxophone, oboe and bassoon. Reeds are delicate, bruising and breaking easily. A wick is a bundle of fibres which draws oil up from a reservoir in a lamp. When a burning wick starts to smoulder, this indicates that the oil supply is running out and the lamp is in danger of going out completely. The imagery in the words “*a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench*” describes the gentle, kind, caring compassion of the Messiah.

We have seen this tender-hearted concern consistently displayed in the ministry of Jesus as revealed in Mark’s gospel. Whoever came to Jesus in need received healing. He refused no one; not the man with an unclean spirit in Capernaum, not a leper, not a paralytic, not a man with a withered hand, not a man with a legion of demons, not a woman with a flow of blood, not the daughter of a synagogue ruler, not all the sick who came flocking to him. Yet here in our text, we see Jesus in a way that seems completely uncharacteristic, unlike anywhere else in the gospels.

When He is approached by woman in desperate need, His response to her seems to be aloof, apathetic and insulting. In Matthew’s parallel account (Matt 15:21-28) Jesus remains silent, despite her crying to Him in her deep distress (v22-23): “*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*”. When He finally responded to her, He seems to refer to her a ‘dog’ because of her ethnic background as a Gentile. You may be aware that this passage has been used by some people as a ‘proof text’ to show that Jesus was not sinless. They suggest that He needed to be instructed by a woman so that He would learn not to be a ‘rude insensitive racist’ anymore.

As we look carefully and closely at this portion of God’s Word, we will see the perfect divine nature of Jesus revealed as the great faith of a ceremonially unclean gentile woman is also made evident. We’ll see this Syrophoenician woman’s remarkable faith in our three points:

1. Persistent faith
2. Perceptive faith
3. Proven faith
4. **Persistent faith**

Sometimes New Zealanders go to another country like Australia, Rarotonga or further afield to get a break from the pressures of work and life here. Mark records that Jesus went to a different country – the region of Tyre and Sidon (v24), to the North-east of Israel. Tyre and Sidon were Phoenician cities on the narrow coastal plain between the Lebanese mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. They still exist as towns today in the country of Lebanon, south of the capital Beirut. These ancient pagan settlements were founded before the Israelites first came into the land of Canaan. About 870 B.C. Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king and she brought the worship of Baal into the king of Israel’s court. You may recall from Scripture that the Lord in righteous judgement said, “*The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel*” (1 Kings 21:23).

It was into this Gentile, unclean Phoenician territory that Jesus came for a break away from the crowds who constantly followed Him and also away from the powerful religious rulers who were deeply critical of Him. He ‘*did not want anyone to know*’ where He was when he went into the house where he was staying. However, somehow a woman, ‘a Syrophoenician by birth’, found out where Jesus was. She is referred to as a ‘Syrophoenician’ because Phoenicia was governed by Syria under the administrative system of the Roman Empire.

Matthew records that she addressed Jesus by the Messianic title ‘Lord, Son of David’ and she clearly believed that Jesus had the power to rid her daughter of the unclean spirit which possessed her. Matthew also records that she was crying out to Jesus. The word he uses means to call out. He also writes that ‘*Jesus did not answer her a word*’ (Matt 15:23). It seems that the woman was outside the house whilst Jesus remained inside ignoring her loud cries for help.

When she did get inside, the desperate woman ‘*came and fell down at his feet*’ – indicating both her respect for Jesus and her profound grief and need. Mark records that ‘*She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter*’ (v26). The word ‘begged’ is in a verb form which indicates ongoing, persistent activity ‘she kept on begging him’. Here was a desperate woman who was on the ground begging Jesus for help, yet He seems to have little or no interest in helping her. When Jesus did finally answer her, it sounds like an insult: *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” (v27).*

You might expect her to be offended, put-off or deeply discouraged, but when she answers Jesus, she agrees with Him! We could say that she ‘barked’ back at him saying *“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” (v28).* Nothing could discourage this woman from seeking favour from Jesus. Not having her cries ignored whilst she was outside the house. Not needing to repeatedly beg Jesus for help. Not even a statement from Him that could easily have been received as a highly offensive derogatory racial slur. What is going on here? Why did Jesus seem to make things so difficult? Why does He seem so detached and disinterested?

The ‘parable of the persistent widow’ that we heard earlier from Luke 18 helps us to understand. There Jesus puts truth in the mouth of an unrighteous judge who has been persistently bothered by a pleading widow. “*And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?”* (Luke 18:7). It pleases God, at times, not to answer our pleas for help promptly, but to delay for a time. As we wait, He tests us, not because He is cruel and uncaring, but because He is pleased to grow our faith and trust in Him through what often appears to us to be unnecessary delay and disinterest.

Remember how the psalmist cries out ‘*How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?*’ (Psalm 13:1); ‘*How long, Lord, will you hide yourself forever?*’ (Psalm 89:46); ‘*How long must your servant endure*’ (Psalm 119:84). In what appears to be aloof inaction, Jesus is displaying this aspect of God’s perfect character and work. Just as God knows all things (e.g. Psalm 139:2) and does not test us beyond our ability to endure (1 Cor 10:13) so Jesus knew what was in the heart of all people (John 2:24) and He did not test the Syrophoenician woman beyond her ability to persist. This is not surprising, because He is the Son of God, the Image of the Invisible God (Col 1:15).

Perhaps you are struggling at present, or you have done in the past, because it seems (or seemed) that God doesn’t care. It feels like He is distant and detached, you think that He has abandoned you. You may become angry at God, and/or your faith may waver. Beloved brothers and sisters, it pleases the Lord, for our good and for the good of others, to test our faith. The experience is generally not pleasant, not comfortable, but the result glorifies God and blesses us. James wisely writes “*the testing of your faith produces steadfastness*” (Jam 1:3). The word translated ‘testing’ here was used in the ancient world to describe the process of refining metals with fire to prove their worth and to refine them. ‘Steadfastness’ (is perseverance and conveys the idea of unflinchingly bearing up under a heavy load. It is the word used of Jesus, ‘*who for the joy that was set before him* ***endured*** *the cross, despising the shame*’ (Heb 12:2). This remarkable woman was being tested by Jesus and as a result her perceptive faith was revealed, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Perceptive faith**

You can tell much about someone’s understanding by how they respond to you in conversation. A perceptive person notices and understands things that many other people do not. The Syrophoenician woman was very perceptive when she replied to these testy words from Jesus: *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” (v27).* It is significant here that Jesus uses the Greek word translated ‘dogs’ which refers to a ‘small dog’, ‘pet dog’ or ‘household dog’. This word for ‘dog’ is different to the one that He spoke in Matthew 7:6 when He said ‘*Do not give to dogs what is holy*’; thereby referring to unspiritual people or to an ‘unclean’ animal. So we could translate verse 27 as: *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the household pet dogs.” (v27).*

There is a rightful priority in the distribution of food within a home. A wise father ensures that his own children have sufficient before giving any left-overs to the household pets. I am affectionate to my own dog Ruth, she is a much-loved household pet, but I wouldn’t let my own family go without in order to keep her fed. We feed Ruth with specifically prepared dog food, whereas in the 1st century, pet dogs would be fed scraps from the table. We know from archaeological evidence that domesticated dogs were kept in some of the houses of wealthy people in the Roman Empire in the 1st century.

In a few metaphorical words, Jesus spoke of the priority of the Jews over the Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation. Matthew records more of the words of Christ in his parallel account, writing that Jesus said to His disciples: “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matt 15:24). When Jesus sent His twelve disciples out, He instructed them “*Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matt 10:5-6). Remember that prior to the resurrection of Christ, there was a ‘*dividing wall of hostility*’ (Eph 2:14) between Jews and Gentiles.

Christ’s mission on earth as the promised Messiah was first and foremost to the Jews, but He was also ‘*a light to the nations*’ (Isaiah 42:6) as we were reminded in our reading earlier from the prophet Isaiah. The Apostle Paul explains this further in the book of Romans, for example: “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,* ***to the Jew first and also to the Greek***” (Rom 1:16). Also. “*There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek*” (Rom 2:9-10).

As we have already seen from Mark’s gospel, the Jewish religious leaders criticised, unjustly judged, and rejected Christ, the Messiah. Perhaps you have seen children at the dinner table who are so picky, spoilt and ungrateful that they refuse to eat the good food put in front of them with the result that the household pets benefit from lots of scraps. The unbelieving Jews were somewhat like this. John writes of this at the beginning of his gospel. “*He came to his own, and* ***his own people did not receive him****. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*” (John 1:11-13).

Clearly the Syrophoenician woman had not read the book of Romans or John’s gospel because these had not yet been written. We do not know how much she understood of the Old Testament prophesies about the promised Messiah, but she did recognise that Jesus was the Christ, addressing Him as ‘*Lord, Son of David’* (Matt 15:22). Her reply showed her extraordinary understanding and acceptance of God’s plan of salvation at that time in history: *“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” (v28).* She did not presume to be entitled to anything from Jesus, but recognised the possibility of His favour towards her.

In this she perceived what is termed ‘common grace’ in theology. This term can be a bit confusing. There is nothing common about God’s wonderful grace. The word ‘common’ here refers to God’s kind grace extending to all people. David expresses this in Psalm 145: “*The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made*”. Jesus said that God “*makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust*” (Matt 5:45). Also that God ‘*is kind to the ungrateful and the evil*’ (Luke 6:35). Notice the stark contrast between the ‘ceremonially unclean’ Gentile woman’s trusting humble faith and the suspicious proud unbelief of the ‘ceremonially clean’ Jewish leaders.

Where do you fit into all this? Most, if not all, of us are Gentiles, not Jews. Prior to the resurrection of Christ we would be in the ‘ceremonially unclean’ ‘dog’ category. Now, even though there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile (Gal 3:27), like the Syrophoenician ‘dog’, you and I deserve nothing good from Christ. All that we receive is by grace, the unmerited favour of God who is kind, compassionate, and very patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Pet 3:9).

So come to Christ, just as the Syrophoenician woman did, humbly trusting that He will provide for all your needs.

We’ve seen the persistent and perceptive faith of the woman, now we come finally to the productive result of her proven faith in our third point.

1. **Proven faith**

The genuineness of the woman’s faith was revealed in her humble, perceptive and expectant answer in the face of the seeming discouragements of Jesus. She replied *“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” (v28).* To which Jesus responded, “*For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter*”(v29).

How did the woman know that the demon had actually been exorcised from her daughter? She didn’t. Her demon-possessed daughter was at home. She was still at the house where Jesus had hoped to remain hidden. Jesus calls her to believe His words, without, as yet, seeing the evidence of their truth. “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1). In Matthew’s account, her faith is described by Christ as being ‘great’ (Matt 15:28). The Greek word here is the one from which we get the term ‘mega’.

This was a Gentile woman whose ‘mega faith’ resulted in her great need being powerfully and miraculously met by Jesus. We could say that her faith was ‘productive’ in that, by grace, it resulted in the healing that she desired. Mark concludes this account with the glorious outcome. “*And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone*” (Mark 7:30). The brief, but extraordinary encounter of the Syrophoenician woman with Jesus powerfully reveals that proven faith in the Christ results in great blessing.

What can you and I learn from this text about Jesus?

* He was not distant, detached or derogatory towards a woman in need, He knew her heart and her situation perfectly, as only God can. He is not distant, detached or derogatory to any who come to Him in faith.
* He masterfully tested her so that her proven faith would be revealed to her, to his disciples and through God’s Word to generations of Bible readers like us. Her remarkable faith glorifies God.
* He demonstrated the same character as God the Father, who sometimes withholds blessings for a time from those He loves; not because He is cruel, but because His desire is to carefully grow faith.
* He used the graphic imagery of dogs feeding from scraps of food left by children to illustrate God’s plan of redemption over time: for the Jews first, then the Gentile nations.
* He rewarded the woman’s faith by graciously delivering her daughter from the demon who possessed her.
* His perfect kindness, compassion and grace were in no way diminished by His perfect wisdom in proving the genuineness of the woman’s faith.

What can you and I learn from this text about the woman?

* She believed that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of David.
* She was relentless in her pursuit of Christ.
* She was not discouraged by obstacles.
* She was humble, readily accepting that she deserved nothing from Jesus.
* She firmly believed that Jesus had the power to help her in her need.
* It would have been difficult for her to cope with what would have seemed, for a while, to be the lack of desire that Jesus had to help her.
* She demonstrated faith that was proven through the apparent slowness of Jesus in responding to her need.
* She was highly commended by Jesus to a degree only matched by His words about a Gentile centurion: “*truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith*” (Matt 8:10).
* Her faith is therefore an excellent model for you and me to follow

So, what can you and I learn from this text about our own lives?

* Sometimes the Lord can seem distant and slow in responding to our needs. Faith is tested at times like these, the process producing steadfastness when we continue to trust the Lord in the face of obstacles to faith. These can include: disappointments when our expectations of the Lord or others are not met; repeated prayers that do not seem to be answered by the Lord; difficult circumstances that stretch us beyond our own resources to be able to cope, throwing us in our weakness on the Lord.
* Genuine humility before the Lord is usually evidence of true faith. God’s Word says, *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you”* (James 4:10).
* Faith is rewarded with blessings in this life; sometimes what we have asked the Lord for, at other times gifts that we did not know we needed like: *‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’* (Gal 5:22).
* By faith in Jesus we become children of God.
* Faith will certainly be rewarded with blessings in the life to come in the New Heavens and New Earth.

You may or may not like those four-legged creatures called dogs, but I can assure you that God cares about dogs together with all life forms that He has made (e.g. Ps 50:10-11; Prov 12:10; Matt 6:26; 10:29). As His image-bearers, we are mandated to care responsibly for all His creatures (Gen 1:28).

God cares about people like you and me who are naturally like feral, disease-ridden scavenger stray dogs cast out from His house. He invites you, me and all who will listen to His voice to come to His Son Jesus Christ in faith, believing that He will meet all your needs.

Have you responded to His invitation? He accepts all who come to Him, not as domesticated pets in His house, but as His adopted children, fellow heirs together with all believing Jews and Gentiles, members of the same body of Christ, partakers of the promise in Jesus Christ through the gospel (Eph 3:6).

Brothers and sisters, we are promised, not a few crumbs from His table, but a feast of blessings and delights, both now and in the future when we shall eat with our Lord at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7).

AMEN.