

Amazed at the Power of Jesus

Matthew 15:21-39

Mark Vroegop

21 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 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." 23 But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

29 Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. 30 And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, 31 so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

32 Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." 33 And the disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?" 34 And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." 35 And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, 36 he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 38 Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

When I mention the word desperate what comes to mind? Maybe a desert wanderer looking for water or a mom frantically looking for her lost son in mall or the fly-over image of people in New Orleans after Katrina with signs that say, "Help us!" or a teenager bursting through a raging river to get air as he fights the current and undertow or a tear-filled husband in counseling who says, "We need help" or a man who amputated his own arm when he was trapped under a furnace.

Desperation could be defined as having an urgent need or desire, and it is a powerful emotion caused by a significant event, usually a crisis. Desperation is a fork in the road of life when you realize "I'm in trouble." Desperation is realizing that something radical has to happen –

“desperate times call for desperate measures.” The scary thing about moments of desperation is that you suddenly realize that a situation is a bigger problem than what you realized before. And what you do next makes all the difference in the world. That is true not only in life but also when it comes to your soul.

Desperation – realizing that you are in trouble – has a way of revealing some things about us. Desperation presents an opportunity. Our response to these moments shows us a great deal about what we really trust in and where our true hope lies. Desperation has the potential to show you amazing things about the power of Jesus; that is, if you become desperate and if, in your desperation, you run to him.

Matthew 15:21-39 shows us two contrasting examples of desperation. One example shows us a desperation that led to great faith. The other example shows us a desperation that led to despair. And today I’d like for you to think with me about where your desperation leads you? To faith or to despair.

Desperation that Leads to Faith

Our text begins with an indication that Jesus moved to a non-Jewish location for this moment of ministry. Verse 21 tells us that he went to the district of Tyre and Sidon, an area to the north of Galilee which was known as a completely Gentile region. Galilee was a mixed region, but Tyre and Sidon are noted for paganism. In fact Tyre and Sidon were often the object of prophetic rebuke. Additionally, we find that Jesus is approached by a Canaanite woman who was “from that region.” Mark describes her as “a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth” (Mark 7:26). The point is that this woman is completely outside the nation of Israel. To use Matthew’s language she is not just a Gentile, she is a Canaanite, the kind of person who belonged to the tribes that Israel drove out of the Promised Land.

In verse 22 we find that this woman was following Jesus and continually crying out: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” Her statement is loaded with important information that informs our understanding of what is happening here:

- “Have mercy” – She is asking for Jesus to take pity on her. She knows that she deserves nothing. Her only appeal is to the compassion of Jesus.
- “O Lord” – She greets him with a term that indicates power and honor. The Greek word is *kurios*, and it is used throughout the New Testament as a term that acknowledges the supreme authority of Jesus. It can be translated as Master, Owner, or Lord. It is such a powerful acknowledgment of who Jesus is that Paul tells us that “no one confesses Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit” (see 1 Cor 12:3).
- “Son of David” – This is Matthew “code” language here. Matthew introduced this term to us in the very first verse of his gospel – “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ,

the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.” It is code for Messiah. She appeals to him with the term most connected to his messianic office.

- “My daughter is severely oppressed” – We have nothing to indicate what was the manifestation of this demon oppression, but the text does indicate that this oppression was severe, wicked, or cruel.

We can conclude from her appeal that this woman believed that Jesus had the authority and the power to heal her daughter. She addressed him as desperate woman who had faith.

What happens next in the text is a bit disconcerting because it seems as if Jesus treats her unkindly or even with uncharacteristic harshness. First we see that Jesus ignored her request: “But he did not answer her a word” (v 23). Jesus didn’t even acknowledge her request, and there was no way that he didn’t hear her. This was intentional. His silence prompted the disciples to get a bit annoyed because the woman must have kept on crying out to him. Apparently she was persistent in her appeal. They said, “Send her away for she is crying out after us.”

Secondly when Jesus responded to their comment, he made a hard statement. He said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v 24). Jesus says something that is true – his primary ministry has been to Israel (see 10:5-6). But, at the same time, he has ministered to non-Israelites like the Centurion and his servant in chapter 8. So at face value this is a strange thing to say.

The woman must have heard what Jesus said because her next action was very dramatic. She came very close to him, knelt at his feet and said, “Lord, help me.” She pleaded with him. But Jesus’ answer is a hard one and it raises some questions: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” I don’t think that Jesus is necessarily degrading her but rather I think that he saying that it would be improper for a person to neglect his children in order to take care of his pets. The word dog here likely refers to a domesticated dog, a family pet, and it was expected that the dogs would be fed the scraps at dinner. So I don’t think that Jesus is necessarily being offensive here (calling her a mangy mutt), but he is using a metaphor that is meant to be challenging to her.

The woman’s response is amazing. It reflects the depth of her desperation and scope of her faith. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (v 27). Her desperation eclipsed everything else in life. She’s begging Jesus to help her.

Jesus’ final statement brings relief to her and to us. His tone changes dramatically: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire” (v 28). What an amazing statement! Jesus grants her the request and her daughter is delivered.

So why did Jesus talk to this woman this way? Here is why: Jesus was testing her. He was not being rud. He has plans for her beyond just the healing of her daughter. The testing of her desperation revealed where her real trust and real faith was. Jesus' resistance to her made the depth of her faith clear. He was tough because he was testing her.

Jesus' testing has surfaced beautiful faith, and she passed the test.

Desperation that Leads to Despair

The text next turns to a moment of failure in lives of the disciples. Verse 29 tells us that Jesus left that region and went back to Galilee and began a very extensive healing ministry.

30 And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, 31 so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing (Matt 15:30-31).

The result was that the crowds "glorified the God of Israel" (v 31). Imagine this moment: the mute are speaking, the crippled are healed, the lame are walking, and the blind are seeing. The place must have been over-run with excitement, joy, and enthusiasm. People were brought to Jesus, and they were healed.

Jesus then directs his attention towards the disciples and gives them a challenge:

"I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way" (Matt 15:32).

Now this should sound familiar. Remember that they have just been a part of a great "healing" meeting, and they had seen Jesus feed 5000 people in chapter 14. But here Jesus doesn't say, "You give them something to eat" (14:16). Instead he just leaves the problem hanging. I think he does so to draw out from them how they will respond to this crisis. As the reader you can't help but want to shout into the text: "Look for some bread and fish!" But there is too much noise in their heads and hearts about the challenge of the moment. They miss the cue.

What happens in verse 33 is very important. They said, "Where are we going to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?" The feeding in chapter 14 was close to a village, but this one is apparently in a very remote place. They can't dismiss the crowds, and the situation is tough because the people haven't eaten in three days.

Jesus then asked the disciples a question that they should asked: "How many loaves do you have?" (v 34). They answered, "Seven and a few small fish." What follows is very similar to the former feeding in chapter 14.

And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, 36 he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 38 Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan” (Matt 15:35-39).

The people left full but I can only imagine that the disciples left feeling rather empty. Once again they had let the circumstances of life eclipse what they should have known about Christ. Once again their lack of faith surfaces. This is not a good day for the disciples. Their desperation had led them to despair. They missed the potential power of Jesus; they didn't draw from the lessons of the past. The pressure of the circumstances around them caused them to miss the mark on this test. Their desperation did not lead to faith; it led to despair.

I do not think that is by accident that Matthew put the story of the Canaanite woman and the disciples together. These stories don't make sense if Matthew just wanted to prove Jesus' power to heal or to provide food for a large crowd because he's already shown that to us. I don't think that his main point here is that Jesus has the power to perform miracles. Matthew's main point is to show us the connection between Jesus' power and moments of crisis.

Desperation is a crossroads moment, an opportunity for faith or despair.

Don't Miss Jesus in Your Crisis

In light of this contrast between the Canaanite woman and the disciples, let me give you some application points to encourage you not to miss Jesus in the midst of your crisis. There must be some people here today who are desperate. You are standing at a fork in the road, and what you do next will determine a number of things relative to your future.

Here are some truths to remember:

1. God designs spiritual tests

The first truth that I want you to grab is the simple fact that God designs spiritual tests, and that he has a purpose in them. The book of James tells us this clearly:

2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

What is interesting about this passage is the fact that James tells them “for you know that...” but he still tells them. Why? Because tests of any kind are prone to make us question if there

is any real point. And James wants us to know that everything – even moments when we feel like God is being a bit hard – is a part of God’s plan.

2. Hard is not bad

The second thing that I want you to see is a mistake that I see many believers make. They assume that good things come to good people and bad things come to bad people. And that comes from a fundamental flaw in our thinking that “hard is bad.” You see we like things to be easy, and when life becomes hard it presents a defining moment as to how we really view life. But we need to see that hard is not bad. Hard is hard; but it is not bad. Here’s how Paul viewed hard things:

8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead (2 Cor 1:8-9).

3. Desperation reveals what you really want

Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, gives a great definition of the difference between sorrow and despair.

“Sorrow is pain for which there are sources of consolation. Sorrow comes from losing one good thing among others, so that, if you experience a career reversal, you can find comfort in your family to get you through it. Despair, however, is inconsolable because it comes from losing *an ultimate thing*. When you lose the ultimate source of your meaning or hope, there are no alternate sources to turn to. It breaks your spirit.”¹

Keller goes on to say that this is the essence of idolatry. You see desperation has the power to reveal what is ultimate in your life. That is why it is so hard; but that is also why it is such a great opportunity.

4. Your view of Jesus determines your direction

In both stories we had people in crisis. The woman needed a miracle and the disciples needed food. And the great difference between them is the simple fact that the woman saw Jesus differently than the disciples did. She ignored all the circumstances around her and focused on Jesus. The disciples ignored Jesus and focused on the circumstances. And so the question really becomes a matter of how we view Jesus. Do you really believe that he can help you? Do

¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods – The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, (New York, New York: Dutton Publishing, 2009), x-xi.

you really think that he can intervene? Do you really believe that you need his help? Do you really believe that getting Jesus involved will change things? Do you really believe that he has the power to make a difference?

For the apostle Paul this view of Jesus changed how he viewed everything:

8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (Phil 3:8-9).

5. Live by dying!

Finally, one of the most important things about this passage is the contrast between this woman's actions and the disciples. They looked at the circumstances and didn't see any solution despite the fact that the miracle-worker was in their midst. The woman, on the other hand, knew that she needed to get to Jesus, and she was willing to abandon every element of sensibility, pride, pretention, or what others thought of her. She kept begging for mercy. She was desperate to get to Jesus.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 16:24 that person cannot be a disciple of his unless he denies himself and takes up his cross. In other words, the desperate realization that you need help is the first step in finding freedom and joy.

No one comes to Jesus for anything, including salvation, unless first there is a fundamental denial of self. It is the humble who receive mercy (1 Peter 5:5). It is only those who have come to an end of themselves and then looking to Christ, receive mercy. You live by dying!

There is no better of example of this than the Canaanite woman. Her humility revealed great faith. My prayer for you is that you will be amazed at the power of Jesus. But in order to experience his power you must be willing to put away all your sensibility, fall at his feet, and say, "Lord, help me."

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