

# A Syrian Woman's Faith -- Mark 7:24-30

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

*Lord, You see us today as individuals. You know our unique circumstances and understand our attitudes. I pray that You would reach down and interpret today's message to fit the world of each individual here. And as we receive a special message from You, may we be encouraged and convinced that You are more than we ever dreamed of. May our hearts be drawn out to You. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.*

Today's story reminds me of an experience I had while a student missionary in Nepal. I was looking for a place to live. There were no hotels or houses for rent. But this family opened up their home to me. They had a 2-story house. There was the father and mother along with their four children. The grandmother lived in one of the rooms upstairs. In order to accommodate my moving in, they vacated 2 of their 3 upstairs rooms. I was blessed by the hospitality of this family in a foreign country.

In our story today Jesus goes to a foreign territory. There He is welcomed into the home of a family. As we consider Jesus' experience in this region, let's begin with a summary:

*(Jesus left Galilee and went to the borders of Phoenicia. While He was there, a woman came and asked Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Jesus told her that for Him to heal her daughter would be like throwing the children's bread to the little dogs. // When she mentioned that even the puppies eat from the children's crumbs, Jesus responded to her faith by setting her daughter free from the demon.)*

So, in this story, Jesus first experienced leaving Galilee. This was a critical time in Jesus' ministry. In our last story (Mk. 7:1-13) He exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in His day. They were already trying to end His ministry before this, so certainly now they are even more determined to bring His life and ministry to an end. This is not the only challenge facing Jesus. His popularity has ended with a lot of the people who had been following Him. According to John 6:66, many people have walked away from Him in disgust at the reality that He hadn't come to save them from the Romans. So He has experienced a rejection in Galilee similar to what He had experienced in Judea a year before.

So, where did He go, when He left Galilee? Mark 7:24 says He went to "the region of Tyre and Sidon". Tyre and Sidon were two major cities on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and were busy sea ports. They had been inhabited by the Canaanites for over a thousand years. The people who lived here were long time enemies of the Jews. For Jesus to step into their territory would be like an Israeli going into the territory of the Palestinians. As soon as you cross the border you notice a sudden change. The word translated, "region", is better translated "border" and half of the original Greek manuscripts do not mention Sidon, but only Tyre. So, it is likely that Jesus went to an area on the southern border of this area known as Phoenicia, not far from the city of Tyre. Mark 7:24 also mentions that Jesus "wanted no one to know it". He was searching for a secluded place and appeared to find one in the home of a family in that region. Perhaps this family had personally benefited from Jesus' ministry and become acquainted with Him while traveling through Galilee.

Second, Jesus experienced an urgent request. Jesus wanted to spend some time unnoticed, but Mark 7:24 says that "He could not be hidden". It doesn't take long for someone in need to find Him. Mark 7:25 says, "For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him". Actually, the Greek says, "But immediately a woman...heard about Him". It seemed that no sooner had Jesus emptied His pockets and sat down, that a woman in need found Him. Mark 7:26 mentions that she was a "Greek" or a "Hellenist", as it is in the Greek manuscripts. Since Mark is a Jew, he would most likely use this in the Jewish way, simply referring to her as a non-Jew. Throughout the New Testament Jews and Greeks are contrasted, and the idea portrayed is that the "Greeks" are those who are not Jews. Mark 7:26 also describes this woman as being "Syro-Phoenician". Now the Phoenicians lived in the northern part of the land of Canaan. In fact, Matthew in his account of this story refers to her as a woman of Canaan. Canaan was a son of Ham, the son of Noah. And

one of Canaan's sons was Sidon, a city north of Tyre in Phoenicia. Mark, though, unlike Matthew, also refers to this woman as being Syrian by birth. The Syrian region was north and east of Phoenicia. So, although she lived in the Phoenician region (northern Canaan), it seems from Mark's account that her family heritage was Syrian.

Mark 7:25 mentions that this woman "heard about [Jesus]". We don't know exactly, but it is likely that she had been previously acquainted with Jesus. When she heard that He was in her country, her response was immediate. So, perhaps a faith had been birthed in her heart previous to this story as a result of the reports she had heard about Jesus' miracles in Galilee. Mark 7:25 also mentions that this woman's "daughter had an unclean spirit". When Mark says that this spirit was unclean, he's not saying that this spirit needed to take a bath. He is referring to ceremonial and moral uncleanness. When someone came down with leprosy, a dreadful, loathsome disease, they were forced to cry out, "Unclean! Unclean! Unclean!" They did this in order to warn passersby from coming to close lest they should become infected as well. Demons, then, by being referred to as unclean spirits, were abhorred and dreaded. Mark 7:26 describes the urgency of this woman's request on behalf of her daughter. It says she "kept asking". Her request for help was a repeated occurrence. Truly it reveals her desperation for help.

Third, Jesus experienced exposing a heart of faith. Jesus takes on a different attitude towards this woman than He had towards people previous to this occasion. Matt. 15:22, 23 gives a clearer picture of what was going on as this woman continued asking for help. We won't take the time to turn there, but Matthew mentions that Jesus' first response to this woman was ignoring her. Again, this is in marked contrast to how Jesus has treated people throughout the book of Mark. It seems to be a very strange attitude for Jesus to assume. According to Matthew's account, the disciples at this point stepped in. They urged Him to send her away. They were tired of hearing her incessant pleas for help. The common response of the Jewish rabbis would have been to immediately send this woman away, since she was a "Greek" or non-Jew. So, this is the picture we have that leads into what Jesus says in Mark 7:27. (READ) Here Jesus uses the analogy of a family eating at the table. He says to the woman that it is not proper to give the children's bread to the little dogs. The Jews are represented by the children. Jesus (and the eternal life and blessings He came to give) is represented by the bread. In John 6:35, 48-51 He refers to Himself as the "living bread" and the "bread of life". The non-Jews, and specifically the woman, are represented by the little dogs.

Now notice what the woman says in Mark 7:28. First of all, Mark says she "answered" Jesus. This word shows that this woman was responding to what Jesus said. She took His thought and continued on by taking it a step further. She didn't argue with Jesus or try to refute Him. Somehow she saw a glimmer of hope in His words and used them as a spring board. The New King James version quotes the woman as saying "yet even the little dogs under the table eat the crumbs". But actually, in the original Greek, her words don't portray a counter expression. A better translation might be, "Yes, Lord, that's right! And the little dogs under the table get to eat the crumbs from the children's bread!" It's as if she was continuing the analogy that Jesus started.

Fourth, Jesus experienced responding to words of faith. Mark 7:29 records Jesus' reply with the words "For this saying", but a better translation might be, "Because of what she said". In other words, Jesus is responding to her words, which were full of faith. Jesus then told her, "The demon has gone out of your daughter". This great deliverance was the very thing she had been repeatedly asking Jesus for. And now this very thing has happened. The demon is gone. Mark 7:30 says this woman went back to a peaceful house. She immediately noticed that her daughter was quietly lying on the bed. No more violent convulsions. No more screaming. Peace filled her house.

This is what Jesus experienced in our story. Let us now consider how Jesus is revealed as our Example. Jesus shows us in this story what it means to be a healthy and dangerous Christian. First of all, He is our Example in that He pushed the boundaries. This story records the fourth occasion in which Jesus ministered to a non-Jew. The first record we have is in John's account of Jesus talking to a woman in Samaria (John 4). Samaritans were half Jew and half Gentile. The Jews held prejudice against them, but it was not as strong as their prejudice against the Canaanites. The second record of Jesus ministering to a non-Jew is in Luke chapter 7 where Jesus heals the servant of the Roman centurion in Capernaum. Luke makes a point to say that this centurion was highly regarded by the Jews, because he had shown extreme favor towards them, even building

them a synagogue. The third record of Jesus ministering to a non-Jew was earlier in the book of Mark. In chapter five we learned of how Jesus cast out thousands of demons from a demon-possessed man in Decapolis. Most of those who lived in Decapolis were not Jews, but this incident would not have been so repulsive to the Jews. This act could have been appeared as an act in self-defense, for this demon-possessed man had had every intention of attacking Jesus. And so now this story records a fourth incident in which Jesus ministered to a non-Jew. But this event pushed the boundaries more than the other three. This woman was a Syrian living in Phoenicia, the land of the much-hated Canaanites. There would hardly have been anyone more despised by the Jews than this woman. And so this story reveals Jesus taking the next step in a slow progression. It shows Jesus continuing to push the limits. He is stretching His disciples a little bit more. He wants them to see that ALL people are GOD'S people.

So Jesus reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who sees all people are God's people. What I think about people is not based on my environment or society. Society says that people are nothing more than evolved carbon. My environment judges people based on how much money they have or how attractive they are. But a healthy Christian sees a person as God sees them. How I look at people is not based on my experience. If I was picked on by a big red-headed bully, it doesn't mean that every big red-head is my enemy. If I have a bad experience with a Catholic priest, it doesn't mean that every Catholic priest is evil. My attitude towards people is not polluted by prejudice gained from experience. My attitude is challenged by the Word of God. I realize that as a society we are enslaved to prejudice. I come to see that my attitudes toward certain people are not what they should be. Slowly, one step at a time, God pushes by cultural boundaries. He leads me to the belief that all people are God's people. That's the example of Jesus in our story today.

Even Peter, after preaching a powerful sermon on the day of Pentecost had a problem seeing all people as God's people. God gave him a vision of all these beasts, bugs, and birds and told him to get up and eat them. Peter refused, knowing from the law of God that they were unclean and not fit to be eaten. Peter couldn't figure out why God would ask him to do such a thing. Later, though, Peter acknowledged what God was trying to show him. Notice what he says in Acts 10:28. (Read) Peter states the unwritten rule that Jews were not allowed to keep company with any other race of people. It was forbidden. But then notice what Peter learned from the vision with all the animals. The lesson wasn't that he could now eat pigs, puppies and parrots. The lesson was that he could keep company with any person, regardless of their race. No longer could he call the Canaanites or Syrians unclean. He learned that all people are God's people.

Second of all, Jesus is revealed as our example in this story in that His virtue could not be hidden. According to Mark 7:24, Jesus went to the region of Tyre not wanting anyone to know where He was. But He could not be hidden. Verse 25 then begins with "But immediately". It didn't take long for someone to find Jesus. The word got out that He was in the area. He could not be hidden. Too many people needed what He had. Too many people needed His touch, words, and healing. Even as He tried to ignore this Syrian woman, she found hope in His expression. She saw the compassion in His face. She picked up on the pity in His words. His tone of voice gave Him away. His virtue couldn't be hidden, even if He tried.

And so He shows us that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone whose religion radiates from the inside out. It's someone whose influence is natural not commanded. Jesus wasn't popular because of his degree from the University of Jerusalem. He didn't have one! He wasn't popular because He was handsome and dressed in the latest styles. Isaiah says He had no beauty that we should desire Him (Isaiah 53:2). He could not be hidden because of His virtue that just leaked out of Him from the inside. Life is not put on from the outside. A healthy Christian does not act a certain way because that what she's supposed to do. There's a living connection with the Source of life and happiness. What is on the outside is driven by a relationship with God on the inside. You probably know the song as well as I do - "This little light of mine, I'm going to LET it shine." The goodness of a Christian pushes its way out from the inside, where Jesus sits enthroned.

The woman in our story was an exceptional person. She was free from pride and prejudice. When Jesus referred to her as one of the little dogs under the table, she was not offended. She didn't mope and say, "He just called me a dog. How dare Him!" She accepted her appointed status - "If that's what I am, then I am

entitled to the crumbs!" She experienced Jesus' miraculous power because she accepted Jesus' assessment of her without offense.

As Christians a whole new experience awaits us when we accept our given status. As we close, I invite you to turn with me to 1 Timothy 1:15. (Read) Paul understood Jesus' assessment of him as a sinner. But this did not discourage him. In fact, it gave him hope. The reality is that Jesus came into this world for sinners. He has not saved the righteous. What He did was for people like me.

When Satan reminds you of your sinfulness, remind Him of Your Savior. You may feel like a failure. But it doesn't have to end there. You may be reminded every day of how unlike Jesus you are. But all heaven has been poured out for people like you. So when Satan points out your sins, point him to the One who came to save His people from their sins.

*Father, we're not who we want to be. How often we wish we were a better person. How many days we wake up and are not happy with who we see in the mirror. But it's because we've got issues and make foolish mistakes that we got Your attention. The Son of God walked this earth so that we might become someone completely perfect like You are. When we feel discouraged about ourselves, remind of us our great deliverance in Jesus Christ. Remind us that our future is in a perfect place, in a perfect body, surrounded by perfect people. With this perspective, may we experience Your miracle-working power in our lives just like the woman in our story did. In Jesus' name we ask, amen.*