

The Syrophenician Woman

Mark 7:24-30, Hebrews 11:1

Slide 1

Today we're going to look at a person who's so little known she doesn't even have a name, yet she's an extraordinary figure in the Gospels, because she successfully challenged Jesus for which He commended her.

This story is found in Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28. It's a short story and fairly straight-forward.

Basically, the facts are pretty simple. Trying to stay secluded, Jesus heads off to the city of Tyre where He finds a house to stay in until He's ready to continue His ministry.

Then, a woman, with a demon-possessed daughter, barges in and intrudes on His solitude.

Although in the story it looks like there's some initial hesitancy as to whether or not Jesus was going to help her, she stays and persists until she gets what she desires, the healing of her daughter.

The facts of the story are very simple, but I hope you'll see, as we unpack this a little more, that this woman was truly extraordinary.

Slide 2

First, we need to understand the timeframe in which this is taking place. Jesus had just finished feeding the 5,000 after which He instructed His disciples to get in a boat and head to Beth-sai-da.

While they headed to Bethsaida, Jesus stayed behind to pray. When He finished, Jesus noticed the disciples were "*straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.*"

He walks on the water out to the boat, calms the wind, after which they landed at Gennesaret.

Here He's recognized and people start bringing all their sick out to be healed. Wherever Jesus went, he was recognized and people would bring out their sick.

Finally, the Pharisees cornered Him and gave Him the third degree. It's at this point we read...

Mark 7:24a, "*Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.*"

The Bible doesn't say He went to the city, just the vicinity. In fact, some Bibles say He went to the vicinity of Tyre **and** Sidon. Both of those are on the coast, northwest of the Sea of Galilee.

Slide 3

This is a map of the region showing the area to which Jesus traveled. Tyre was an ancient city but it's also a modern city. It's about 50 miles south of Beirut and about 100 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Located on the Mediterranean coast, it's a very popular area even today; a touristy area that's full of ports.

Slide 4

At this particular point in the Gospels, Jesus had become very popular. He had achieved celebrity status because of being known as a miracle worker.

If we look back at Matthew 4:24, we see that "*News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.*"

That He sought a residence in a foreign land indicates that His purpose was just to seek some rest from the pressing multitudes and the Pharisees and the Jewish leaders, who are always harassing Him about different doctrines and beliefs.

After Jesus arrived, He secluded Himself in a house not wanting anyone to know He was there. We have no information in the Gospels about what kind of house or whose house Jesus went into.

There is no information in the Gospels as to why He chose the area of Tyre. Some suggest that He just wanted to get out of the country in order to spend some time with His disciples, teaching and praying.

It's safe to assume that the purpose of Jesus' movement into this region was not to go on a missionary journey to the Gentiles.

Remember, His ministry was to proclaim the kingdom first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. So, to get some much need rest, He withdrew from Israel.

This is the only time in the record of Jesus' life that He's seen leaving the borders of Israel and going directly into a pagan land. Yet, His desire for solitude was short lived.

Slide 5

Mark 7:25, "In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet."

I want to stop here and address this idea of demon possession or being possessed by an evil spirit. In Biblical times there were all sorts of ailments.

When someone got sick and they couldn't determine what the illness was, they labeled it as demon possession.

Granted, there were probably some misdiagnoses, similar to today. Just like Biblical times, when we see someone that's acting strange or experiencing some sort of psychotic behavior, we want to label it.

There are 30 or more psychotic terms used today. Unfortunately, they all leave out any possibility of a spiritual component.

Because we live in America, we sometimes discount the idea that there may be some spiritual root to some psychological problems.

A while back, there was a shooting at the Naval Yard in Washington, D.C. A young man, who had a clearance to enter the Naval Yard, entered and randomly shot 12 people before he was killed.

If you kept up with the news, you may have seen that when they found his journals and letters, the reason he said he did it was because he felt that the government was transmitting some sort of low-frequency electromagnetic rays into his brain causing him to kill those 12 people.

Unfortunately, the man's not alive, and we'll never know what really caused it. People labeled his action as some sort of psychotic behavior. Few, if any, would recognize it as possibly being demonic or spiritual.

Because of our belief in scientific and psychological evidence, we don't want to acknowledge that there might be a spiritual component to major illnesses.

Yet, in many Third World countries demonic possession is quite common.

There are videos of people that definitely appear to have a demonic element to them. These videos would send a chill up your spine if you watched them.

Now, in today's story, it doesn't matter what we think. All that matters is that this lady believed her daughter was possessed.

Not only that. She believed it so much that her maternal instinct drove her to go and, not only find somebody who would believe her but could heal her daughter.

Yet, this particular woman had no right, at least in the Jewish culture, to seek help from someone like Jesus because Jesus was a Jew.

Slide 6

Mark 7:26a, *"The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter."*

So, the question begs, *"Why was she seeking help from a Jew?"* This woman was a commoner, a non-Jew, a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia.

We must understand that when this verse says that she was a *"Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia,"* it doesn't mean she was a citizen of Greece. In the Jewish mind, you were either Jewish or you were Greek.

To the Jews, who were conquered by Alexander the Great, a Greek was any foreigner because almost all foreigners spoke Greek.

Now, I want to point out here that when we study the Bible, the terms Gentile and Greek are not necessarily referring to the same people group.

Since the New Testament refers to Christians as spiritual Israel, it uses Gentiles as a synonym for non-Christians. Whereby the Jews referred to non-Jews as Greeks.

This woman lived in Syrian Phoenicia and because this, like Rahab, she would've had several strikes against her.

First, she was a woman and as a woman she didn't have a lot of status. Back then, women were treated on the level of livestock.

Then, because she was also Greek, it meant that she was exposed to some of the despicable things of the culture, including the worship of foreign gods. She might have had her own household gods.

The third strike she had against her was... she had a demon-possessed daughter.

She had all these things against her that caused her to be considered unclean and untouchable by the Jewish people and their religious leaders.

But even with all this against her, because she had the maternal love of a mother to find the healing for her daughter, she sought out Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

Before I go into Jesus' response, I want to quickly jump over to Matthew because Matthew gives a fuller picture of how desperate the woman was and the initial response by Jesus and the disciples.

Matthew 15:22-23, "A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly. Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

You get this picture that this poor, desperate woman is in this house begging for relief for her little daughter and Jesus seems to ignore her.

The disciples pick up on that and tell her to leave, you're annoying Jesus. You're annoying us.

Finally, when Jesus decides to give her an answer, the answer He gave wasn't only weird, it actually sounded mean.

Slide 7

Mark 7:27, *“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”*

This doesn't sound like the same man who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, but Matthew clarifies what Jesus said. Matthew 15:24, *“He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”*

This is one of those passages that we, as Christians, like to avoid because Jesus seems to be insensitive and uncaring.

If we were to look up a list of Jesus' character traits, the words uncaring or insensitive would not be on that list. So, what it tells us is maybe something else was going on here.

This is one of those instances where we need to read between the lines to figure out what's happening. Jesus is engaging in what we would call word play.

He's testing this woman's knowledge of Him to see if He can discover some sort of faith in her.

We must understand that in this passage, when Jesus speaks about *“the children,”* who He's talking about are the Jewish people.

The Jews are considered children of Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish faith. Since the Jews were considered children, most scholars agree that Jesus is referring to the Jewish people.

He says it was not right to take the *“children's”* bread, food meant for the Jewish race, and give it to foreigners.

The Jews were God's chosen children, special children and, when you have a special child, what happens is that child often takes on a little bit of pride, to the point where they look down on those that are outside the family circle.

The Jewish people looked at outsiders, the Gentiles and the Greeks as dogs. In this case we're not talking about cuddly dogs. We're talking about scavengers.

We're talking about those dogs that would make their way to the streets of Jerusalem eating the trash and carcasses of dead animals. Those dogs were considered ritually unclean.

When they applied the designation, dog, to the Gentiles and Greeks, they were basically saying you're unclean, filthy.

You're on the scale of a scavenger dog. Consequently, because you're an unclean dog, you're excluded from God's blessings.

When you think about this comment by Jesus, it does come across rude and offensive. So offensive that the woman had every right to just stomp out of the room saying, *"I didn't come here to be insulted."*

But she didn't do that. She stood her ground. We might think, *"Why would somebody put up with that?"*

Well, it goes back to the idea that maybe she saw something that we don't see or the people around her didn't see.

She saw a window of hope. She saw enough hope through the crack of that closed door that she knew maybe Jesus was implying that He was going to heal her little girl.

Slide 8

In order to understand that, we must back up a little and think about this concept of dogs.

When the Jews used the term dogs, especially if you look in the Old Testament, they were thinking in a derogatory sense. They were thinking about a scavenger.

But in many cultures, dogs were esteemed. In Egypt, some dogs were esteemed as gods. Then you had cultures that used dogs for hunting and shepherding.

In the Greek culture, which was similar to our culture today, they would have dogs as house pets.

I read an archaeological article about how they found a lady buried with her little dog. This was thousands of years ago. It was part of the Greek culture. The Greeks treated their dogs like we treat our dogs.

So, when Jesus was referring to dogs, He wasn't talking about scavenger dogs. If you look at the root word, the Greek language used here presents the idea of a little dog, a house dog, or even a puppy.

That's the image you get if you were to read between the lines and understand the original language.

Knowing this about this particular word, Jesus' response could be paraphrased to say, *"First let the children eat all they want for it's not proper to give the master's dinner to the little puppy sitting under the table before the children get their fill."*

That takes the edge off it. Yet, even if it takes the edge off, it still doesn't explain how this woman could have seen this as a window of hope.

A window of opportunity that Jesus was about to do something. That Jesus was about to heal her little girl.

She understood that Jesus was speaking in parable. Remember, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly lesson or meaning.

Here the earthly story is about a puppy sitting under the table and the children sitting around the table.

The heavenly meaning goes into the spiritual realm where Jesus was saying, *“As children of Abraham, those children have the first right to sit around that table and to eat of all the good food.”*

This woman got that. She might have even understood Jesus came first to redeem the lost sheep of Israel. She’s not arguing that at all.

In her response to Jesus, she’s basically said, *“I get that, but I also get something else.”*

She understood that when you have a dog and are eating at the table, eventually a crumb or two will fall off the table either by accident or intentionally.

That’s basically what she was saying in her response. Mark 7:28, *“Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”*

What she’s implying here is that any good master of the house, who has children, isn’t going to kick the dog out of the way if a crumb or two falls to the floor. He’s going to let the dog eat its fill.

She’s saying, *“I don’t want all the bread. I don’t want the main course. I just want a crumb that falls off.”* She knows, by being around Jews or whatever, that the feast God wants to give His children is phenomenal.

She knows that God's grace is available to His chosen people. God desires His children to live in peace and prosperity and health and wealth.

All she's saying was, with that much grace on the table can't you just let a little crumb or two or three drop off and let me eat it.

All I need is a little crumb of God's grace to take care of my daughter. That's all I want.

That got Jesus' attention. He was so impressed with this woman that he told her in Mark 7:29, *"For such a reply, you may go. The demon has left your daughter."*

Leaving Jesus, Mark tells us that *"She went home and found her child lying on the bed and the demon gone."* Meaning the child was healed.

This is the second story of a miracle that Jesus conducted from a distance. The first one being the story of the centurion and his son found in Luke 7.

Slide 9

Conclusion

Closing on this, what was it that made this woman so extraordinary? It goes back to the idea that she was considered an outcast.

She was a marginalized person. She had no status. She had no rights. She was probably a single parent. She was probably a pagan believer. She had a demon-possessed girl.

But she didn't care. She had the heart of a mother, and she was going to find the Person who could heal her little girl no matter what it took.

When she felt like she was being dismissed by the disciples and even Jesus, she didn't stomp out. She didn't run away. She stayed until she got a blessing.

What sums up her character and this whole story is that she was an extraordinary woman because of the faith that Jesus saw in her.

In fact, Matthew, closed this story by Jesus' words: Matthew 15:28, *"Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment."*

There's a lesson or two or three we can learn from this passage. The first lesson is don't quit praying for your family.

Don't quit praying for people, especially the people that for whatever reason can't pray for themselves. Don't stop praying for the people who don't want to pray for themselves. Keep praying.

Make prayer a regular discipline of your life. People don't like to hear that word discipline because it sounds difficult. But it's only difficult if you make it difficult.

Like any other discipline, you don't just try it once and if you don't get your answer, you stop. That would be like if I decided to go to a gym to get in shape.

I get there, workout for an hour, go to the scales and when I see I haven't lost any weight, I quit. Now I wouldn't do that because I know exercise is a discipline.

Therefore, why would we think that what's true in the earthly realm wouldn't be true in the spiritual realm?

Prayer is a discipline. In 1 Thessalonians, we're told to pray continually and, as we pray, we'll eventually come in contact with Jesus.

Which is my second point. Jesus can't and won't hide His presence from anybody. You know why? Because Jesus is love.

Again, when you pray, pray in an act of compassion and out of an act of love. What you're desiring for yourself or you're desiring for other people, if you'll just pray and seek, you'll find Jesus because Jesus is love.

The third point is don't allow yourself to be marginalized. This woman was an outcast. I know there are people today, even Christians who feel marginalized.

They think because of the muck in their past that they're not worthy to eat off the table of God's grace. This passage says that's not true.

Unlike the woman in the story, who had to sit under the table as a puppy, because of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, we get to sit around the table with God's children.

It's all about faith. We must learn that faith is the currency of God's economy. We may not like it but everything in God's economy operates on faith.

This woman was an extraordinary woman. She was a faithful woman. She was an outcast, but she was faithful, so faithful that she continued to seek out God until she got the answer she wanted.

If there's anybody here today that's dealing with something or a family member or a friend, that you feel like giving up on.

You feel that prayer isn't working and you think Jesus isn't listening to you, I'd say let this woman be an example to you.

Continue to pray over and over. Make prayer a discipline. Begin to believe in faith that those things that you are sure of will actually manifest itself within you.

That loaf of God's blessing that's on the table will continue to spill out to you as in faith you believe.