

# GOSPEL FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Matthew 15:21-28

*And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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." 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." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, help me." And He answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

1. This Gospel reading presents us with a true example of a steadfast, perfect faith. This woman withstands and overcomes three great and intense contests, and beautifully teaches us the true character and virtue of faith, namely, that it is a heartfelt confidence in the grace and goodness of God, which is learned and revealed through the Word. St. Mark [7:25] says that she had heard the report about Jesus. What kind of a report? Without doubt a good report and reputation that Christ was a godly man and gladly helped everybody. This report about God is a true Gospel and word of grace. This is the source of this woman's faith, for if she had not believed, she would not have run after Him. So we have often heard how St. Paul says that faith comes through hearing and that the Word must precede and be the beginning of salvation (Romans 10 [:17]).

2. But how does it happen that many more heard this good report about Christ, and yet they did not run after Him and paid no attention to this good report? Answer: The physician is helpful and welcome to the sick, but the healthy pay no attention to him. This woman perceived her need, and for that reason she ran after the sweet fragrance (Song of Solomon 1 [:3; 4:11]). So also Moses must come first and teach us to perceive our sins so that grace may become sweet and welcome.

Therefore, all is lost, no matter how kindly and delightfully Christ is portrayed, if one is not first humbled by knowledge of himself and is not eager

for Christ, as the Magnificat says: "He fills the hungry with good things, and the rich He sends away empty" [Luke 1:53]. All of this is said and written for the comfort of the miserable, poor, needy, sinful, and despised people, so that in all of their need they know to whom they should flee for comfort and help.

3. But see how Christ drives and pursues faith in His people so that it becomes strong and firm. First, she runs after His good reputation and cries out with sure confidence that He would deal graciously with her according to what was reported about Him. But Christ pretends to be completely different, as if He would let her faith and good confidence be wrong and what was reported about Him be false [Matt. 15:23-24]. Thus she could have thought: "Is this a good and kind man?" Or: "Are these the good words which I have heard about Him, on which I have relied? It must not be true; He is your enemy and does not want you; He could at least speak a word and say to me: 'I do not want you.' He is as silent as a stump."

It is a very hard blow when God appears to be so stern and angry and hides His grace so very deeply. This is well-known by those who feel and experience it in their hearts and think that He will not do what He has said and will let His Word be false. This happened to the children of Israel at the Red Sea [Exod. 14:10-12] and otherwise to many other great saints.

4. Now, what does the woman do about this? She turns her eyes away from His unfriendly appearance, is not misled by all of that, does not dwell on it, but clings steadily and firmly to her confidence in the good report she had heard and grasped about Him, and does not cease [Matt. 15:25-27].

We must also do the same and learn to cling firmly to His Word alone, even if God with all His creatures would act differently than this Word says about Him. How it hurts nature and reason when, in destitution, she takes off, and leaves behind everything that she senses, and clings to the bare Word alone, even when she senses the opposite. May God help us in time of need and of death to such courage and faith!

5. Second, when her outcry and faith do not help, the disciples step forward with their faith and plead for her; they think that they will certainly be heard [Matt. 15:23]. When they think that He should become gentler, He becomes all the more harsh and lets both their faith and their plea miss their goal, as she sees and senses. He is no longer silent and does not let them doubt, but rejects their plea and says, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" [Matt. 15:24].

This blow is still harsher, since not only our own person is repudiated but also that comfort is rejected which we still have, namely, the comfort and intercession of godly and holy people. When we feel that God is ungracious to us or we suffer some other need, our last resort is to go to godly, spiritual people and seek advice and help from them, if they are willing [to help]

as love demands. Yet nothing comes of that—even they are not heard, and things are only worse with us.

6. Here we could reproach Christ for all the words in which He has promised to hear His saints, such as: "If two are gathered to ask for something they agree on, it will be done for them" [Matt. 18:19]; and "Whatever you ask, if you believe, it will be yours" [Mark 11:24]; and many more. Where are those promises now? He quickly answers and says, "Yes, it is true. I hear every plea, but I have made that promise to the house of Israel."

What do you think? Is that not a thunderbolt that dashes both heart and faith into a thousand pieces, when we feel that God's Word, on which we build, was not spoken to us but applies [only] to others? Here all saints and intercession are at a standstill, and the heart must abandon the Word, if it would stick with its own perceptions.

7. But what does the woman do? She does not give up. She clings to the Word, even though it is being forcefully torn out of her heart. She does not turn away from His stern answer, but still trusts firmly that His goodness is still hidden behind it. She still does not think that Christ is or can be ungracious. That is what "firmly clinging" means.

8. Third, she runs after Him into the house—as Mark [7:24–25] writes—perseveres, falls down before Him, and says, "Lord, help me!" [Matt. 15:25]. There she gets the final deathblow, when He says directly to her (as the words read) that she is a dog and unworthy to share the children's bread [Matt. 15:26]. What will she say to this? He simply asserts that she is one of the damned and lost, who is not to be numbered among the elect.

9. That is an answer that can never be contested, one that no one can get past. Yet she does not cease, but concedes His judgment and grants that she is a dog. She desires also no more than a dog, namely, to "eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" [Matt. 15:27].

Is not that a masterpiece? She clutches at Christ's own words. He compares her to a dog; she grants that and asks nothing more than that He would let her be a dog, as He Himself had judged her to be. Where could He go? He is captured. We let a dog have the crumbs under the table; that is its right. Therefore, He now completely opens His heart to her and yields to her will, so that she is now not a dog, but a child of Israel [Matt. 15:28].

10. This was written for all our comfort and instruction, so that we may know how deeply God hides His grace from us, so that we would not consider Him according to our perception and thinking but strictly according to His Word. Here you see that though Christ pretends to be harsh, yet He gives no final judgment when He says, "No." Rather, all His answers sound like no, but they are not no—they are undecided and pending.

He does not say, "I will not listen to you," but is silent and says neither yes nor no. So also He does not say that she is not of the house of Israel, but that He was sent only to the house of Israel [Matt. 15:24]. Thus He leaves it undecided and pending between no and yes. So He does not say, "You are a dog, and we should not give you the children's bread"; rather, "It is not right [to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs]" [Matt. 15:26]. Again, He leaves it undecided whether she is a dog or not. Nevertheless, all three points sound more like no than yes, even though there is more yes there than no. In fact, there is only yes there [cf. 1 Cor. 1:19–20], but it is very deep and secret, and it looks only like no.

11. This points out the condition of our heart in temptation. As it perceives, so Christ acts. [Our heart] thinks there is nothing else but only no, and yet that is untrue. Therefore, it must turn away from this perception and with a firm faith in God's Word grasp and hold onto the deep, secret yes under and above the no, as this woman does. When we grant that God is right in His judgment against us, then we have won and caught Him in His own words.

For example, when we feel in our conscience that God reproaches us as sinners and judges us unworthy of the kingdom of heaven, then we experience hell and think that we are eternally lost. Whoever has this woman's ingenuity should catch God in His own judgment and say: "Yes, Lord, it is true. I am a sinner and unworthy of Your grace. Nevertheless, You have promised forgiveness to sinners, and You 'came not to call the righteous' [Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32] but (as also St. Paul says) 'to save sinners' [1 Tim. 1:15]." Then, by His own judgment, God has to have mercy on us.

12. When King Manasseh repented, as his prayer shows, he granted that God was right in His judgment, confessed his guilt as a great sinner, and made use of God's promised forgiveness of sinners [2 Chron. 33:12–13, 18–19]. So also David says, "Against You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may remain just in Your words and not be faulted in Your judgment" (Psalm 51 [4]).

When we do not endure God's judgment and cannot say yes when He considers and judges us to be sinners, then all hostility comes down on us. If the condemned could do it, they would be saved in a moment. We certainly say with our mouths that we are sinners, but when God Himself says this in our hearts, then we no longer stand, and we desperately desire to be godly and regarded as the godly, as long as we would be free from His judgment. But it must be so; if God is to be just in His words [Ps. 51:4] that you are a sinner, then you can make use of the right which God has given to every sinner, namely, the forgiveness of sins. Then you not only eat the crumbs under the table like the dogs, but you also are a child [of God] and have God as your own, just as you want.

13. That is the spiritual meaning of this Gospel, together with the scriptural explanation. Just as it happened for this woman in the physical sickness of her daughter, whom she healed miraculously through her faith, so it also happens to us when we are to be healed of sin and spiritual sickness, which is a truly wicked devil. She must become a dog, and we must become sinners and fuel for hellfire, and then we have already recovered and are saved.

14. Whatever more is to be said on this Gospel reading, such as that one can obtain grace and help through the faith of another without his own faith, as happened here to the woman's daughter, has been sufficiently treated elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> It is also clear enough and easy to find more about the example of love given us here in this Gospel reading by Christ and His disciples, together with this woman, since none acts, prays, and cares for himself, but each for another.

<sup>1</sup> See sermon for Third Sunday after Epiphany on Matt. 8:1-13.

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