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Sermon Notes

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Astonishing Faith Unleashes Limitless Power

Matthew 15:21-28

All my Christian life, I have delighted in stories about men and women of faith. People whose faith enabled them to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.

Perhaps one of the greatest men of faith in church history was George Mueller, who by faith cared for 10,000 orphans in England. He trusted God again and again for their material needs... daily food, clothing, shelter, medical and educational needs

Toward the end of his life, in August of 1877, George Muller was traveling on a steamship, the *Sardinian*, across the North Atlantic to Canada and then to the U.S. where he was scheduled to meet with the President.

There came an immense fog that caused the captain of the vessel to slow his engines, for fear of striking an iceberg (the very thing that would doom the Titanic 35 years later in that same part of the ocean). Mueller went to see the captain, whose name was Joseph E. Dutton. He explained that he had to be in Quebec by the following afternoon. The Captain explained that it was impossible because of the fog.

George Mueller answered, "My eye is not on the fog, but on the God who holds every circumstance of my life in his hands. Let us go down to the chartroom and pray." The Captain went reluctantly, and Mueller prayed a simple prayer. As the Captain began to pray, Mueller stopped him. "First of all, you don't believe that God will. Second of all, I believe God already has... so there's no need whatsoever for you to pray. You may go up and you will see... the fog has lifted."

Now here's the perennial question... did Mueller's faith-filled prayer move the fog, or did God move the fog? The Biblical answer seems to be... BOTH

James 5:16 The intense prayer of the righteous is very powerful.

Faith-filled prayer is EFFECTIVE! It does amazing things...

Matthew 21:21 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, ... you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done.

Now in the end, true faith-filled prayer is totally humble and gives all glory to God. If a person prays for a mountain to be thrown into the sea, and it does... the person knows full well it was the hand of an omnipotent God that moved it.

In today's account, we are going to see BOTH the astonishing faith of a Canaanite woman and the astonishing power of the Lord Jesus.

I. Christ's Mysterious Manner

Robert Stein, *Difficult passages in the Gospels*: "The problem is obvious. Jesus' words appear harsh, austere, insensitive. ... The Jesus of the Gospels, however, is a loving and kind Jesus with a special compassion for the outcasts of society, and this woman is an outcast in the Jewish mind."

Let's set the context

A. Jesus Retreats

Matthew 15:21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

1. Greek word means more than just "went away"; strategic retreat
2. Why? To escape building pressure that would bring issues to a head too soon
 - a. Pressure from the huge multitudes that were crushing in on Him
 - b. Pressure from possible arrest at the hands of Herod Antipas
 - c. Pressure MOST OF ALL from the Jewish religious leaders, the Scribes and Pharisees, who had already decided Jesus had to die (12:14) and whom Jesus had deeply offended in Matthew 15
3. BUT this woman found him anyway!

Mark 7:24-25 [Jesus] entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet.

B. Tyre and Sidon: Notorious in Jewish History

1. Tyre and Sidon were well-known as a prosperous pagan society founded on shipping, trade and commerce all over the Mediterranean
2. First started positively: Hiram, king of Tyre, sent King David cedar logs and craftsmen to build his palace; after Hiram sent Solomon building materials and a skilled craftsman for the Temple
3. BUT the flip side was far darker
 - a. Tyre and Sidon represented worldly luxury through abundant sea trade... likened by Isaiah to plying the trade of a prostitute
 - b. Worse, Amos 1 and Joel 3 reveal that they were actually involved in the slave trade
 - c. Also, (Ezekiel 26) they mocked and celebrated the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians
 - d. Ezekiel 28, implying Satan was actually the true ruler of Tyre and Sidon
 - e. Therefore several prophets predicted the total devastation of Tyre and Sidon: Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah
4. YET for all of this, Jesus knew them better
 - a. He knew that hundreds of Gentiles had been coming to see Him, to listen to Him preach and to have their illnesses cured, including many from Tyre and Sidon (Luke 6:17-19)
 - b. One of Jesus' most amazing statements

Matthew 11:21-22 "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and

ashes. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.

C. Who Was this Woman?

1. She's a Canaanite, the very people God had commanded Joshua to destroy completely when the Jews conquered the Promised Land
2. Canaanite women in particular were the focus of a warning from God, that the Jewish men should not INTERMARRY with them

Mark 7:26 The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia.

3. So, this woman would have been a complete outcast as far as the Jews were concerned... a Canaanite woman
4. BUT YET she has a tremendous faith in Christ, and is for all time memorialized in Scripture as a clear example of conquering faith

D. What Was Her Plight?

1. Her daughter was demon-possessed

Vs. 22 [She was] crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

2. Mark's gospel heightens the fact that she was young... he says "Her little daughter"
3. Demon possession is a very serious spiritual affliction
 - a. A demon takes over the mind and personality and even body of a human being
 - b. The demon or demons do bodily harm to the person and make the lives of everyone around them utterly unbearable
 - c. Nothing could cure this little girl
4. This seems to have been an especially bad case... an extra Greek word is used to heighten that sense

E. Jesus' Strange Actions

1. First, He didn't answer her at all (vs. 23)
2. Second, He limits His ministry to Jews

Matthew 15:23-24 His disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

3. Third, in dealing with her directly, He seems to insult her and call her a dog

Matthew 15:25-26 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. ²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

4. Mitigating factors
 - a. We don't have a record of tone of voice or facial expressions
 - b. The Greek implies Jesus had a longer conversation with her than is recorded here... literally "Jesus was saying to her, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to their dogs'"
 - c. "Dogs" here in Greek is not the wild, aggressive stray dog that roams the street and fends for itself by fighting off other strays and picking through garbage; the word used here is more like "puppies"... a family dog that's almost one of the family

YET... for all of that, Jesus' actions seem strange

II. Christ's Wise Motives

A. Ruling Out False Options: It Was Not Because...

1. Not because He didn't care about Gentiles, or had no saving purpose

Genesis 12:3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Isaiah 49:6 I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

- a. After Christ's resurrection, He would send His disciples to the ends of the earth

- b. One of the places they would go first would be this very region

Paul, on his journey to Jerusalem, landed at Phoenicia, and went and visited the disciples in Tyre, of which there were many who loved Paul deeply

- c. Jesus clearly had a saving intention for the entire world, including Tyre and Sidon
2. Not because He lacked the power to do miracles in a Gentile land
 - a. Jesus was God Omnipotent... there was nothing He could not do
 - b. Jesus was no more or less powerful in Tyre and Sidon than He'd been in Judea
 3. Not because He lacked mercy or compassion for her plight or that of her daughter
 - a. Jesus had the most perfect compassion of any human being in history; again and again the Gospels speak of Jesus' compassion
 - b. Anyone who came to Him empty and as a beggar went away full and rich, with their need abundantly met
 4. Not because He was weary and annoyed and gave her a surly answer based on His fatigue... even while dying on the cross, he didn't sin
 5. Not because he was taking a break from ministry and didn't want to care for her needs at that point
 6. Not because there was only so much "bread" to be fed to His children, and if He gave some to her there wouldn't be enough for them
 - a. Jesus had limitless power and ability
 - b. No harder for him to feed 6000 than it was to feed 5000
 7. Not because she didn't ask properly or with enough faith
 - a. Jesus commends her faith in the end; He wasn't forcing her to give more or He wouldn't respond
 - b. It wasn't that she hadn't groveled enough and He wanted her to show proper respect

It wasn't for all these reasons... why then?

B. The Proper Order of God's Redemptive Plan: Jews First

1. To the Jew First

- a. Peter spoke about this to the Jews in the Temple

Acts 3:26 "For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways."

- b. Over and over the Apostle Paul displayed God's commitment, as he wrote in Rom. 1 "To the Jew first, then to the Gentile"
- c. Paul acted it out in his ministry... always going to the Jewish synagogues first
- d. Paul spoke it to hostile Jews who were rejecting the gospel

Acts 13:46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered [the Jews] boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles."

This was God's strategy

It was part of God's redemptive plan for Christ to be sent FIRST to His own people, then to have them REJECT HIM so that He would die on the cross

ESV John 1:11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

So Jesus declared the FOCUS of His ministry... it was the Jews

Matthew 15:24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

2. Christ Hadn't Died Yet, so the Gentiles were still on the outside

- a. The Gentiles were excluded from citizenship among the people of God by the Laws of Moses
- b. Once Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple was torn in two and the barrier preventing access to God were removed for everyone, including BOTH the Jews and Gentiles

c. Ephesians 2 speaks of how the “barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles has been removed by the death of Christ

d. But at that point, the barrier was still there

C. The Proper Order of Christ’s Strategic Plan: Apostles First

1. Christ also had come to this region to focus on His disciples
2. One way to understand His statement is that the disciples are the children and the children’s bread is the dedicated time Jesus came to Tyre to spend with them
3. Jesus could only be doing one thing at a time in the days of His ministry on earth
4. “It’s not right to stop working with my disciples so I can do a healing ministry here in Tyre and Sidon”

D. To Test Her Faith?

1. Common explanation: Jesus was testing her faith, seeing if she would come back
2. More specifically, He was humbling her and seeing if she would overcome the obstacles
3. I think, knowing her heart, Jesus was not merely testing faith, but I think He was DEVELOPING and STRENGTHENING her faith, as well as putting it on display for the rest of time

Illus. Physical therapist strengthens weakened muscles by testing them vigorously, even OPPOSING the motion so the patient has to exert more force, more willpower, more strength, thus developing the weak muscle

So Jesus seems to OPPOSE her and FIGHT AGAINST her, despite the fact that He really DESIRES to give her what she wants

Ultimately, Jesus wants to put this woman’s faith on display for all time

III. True Faith Put on Display

A. The Basis of Faith

1. Faith must have a BASIS... something to trust, a reason to believe
2. We don't have faith in faith itself...
 - a. True faith is not blind... a leap into the dark
 - b. Nor is it an optimistic outlook

**I believe, for every drop of rain that falls,
A flower grows...**

**I believe that somewhere in the darkest night,
A candle glows...**

John MacArthur: "That sort of faith is essentially faith in faith, which is to say no faith at all. To jump out of an airplane with a parachute is an act of faith. To jump without a parachute while exclaiming, 'I believe' is an act of stupidity. To say no more than 'I believe in love,' or 'I believe in believing,' or 'I believe it will all work out' is contentless faith and therefore pointless and powerless."

3. Canaanite woman clearly had heard of Jesus' miracles and knew of the Jewish prophecies concerning the Messiah...

"Lord, Son of David..."

She calls Him... she has HEARD of Christ and has believed what she has heard; FAITH COMES FROM HEARING THE MESSAGE ABOUT CHRIST

B. The Reverence of Faith

1. She calls Him "Lord"
2. Later on, she bows down before Him and worships Him
3. She is submissive, reverent... not presuming on Him or demanding from Him; she knows He is exalted and treats Him accordingly

C. The Confidence of Faith

1. There is no doubt in her mind whatsoever that Jesus is CAPABLE of doing this; that is why she is so persistent, as we shall see

2. The essence of great faith is confidence that God has the power to perform the thing which is desired

Ephesians 3:20 to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us

D. The Repentance of Faith

1. "Have mercy on me" she calls
2. She recognizes she doesn't deserve anything from the Lord...she's not in a position to demand anything
3. Once we acknowledge that we are sinners, all we can do is cry out for mercy and humbly accept what comes

E. The Persistence of Faith

1. Jesus puts up ONE ROADBLOCK AFTER ANOTHER, as we have mentioned
2. True belief is PERSISTENT, and does not easily give up in prayer
3. Notice her persistence springs also from her LOVE for her daughter

True intercession: to link yourself up entirely with the misery of another and pray for that person as though it were happening to YOU

Vs. 22 have mercy on ME! Vs. 24 "Lord, help ME!" she said.

I think God tests us in prayer to strengthen our compassion, so we care MORE for the person we're praying for

4. Faith OVERCOMES all obstacles and keeps persisting; Jacob wrestled all night with an angel

Genesis 32:26 Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Romans 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

F. The Humility of Faith

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Amazing answer!! She finds hope even in a seeming put-off...

The image is a household dinner table; there must be some scraps, some extra that could fall from the table after the children are all fed

1. When Jesus treats her like this, she doesn't bristle, she doesn't bridle up against His words
2. He calls her a dog of sorts, but she actually agrees

"True, Lord"... she says

Yes, I am a dog, and less than a dog... but please heal my daughter anyway!!

3. Faith takes its rightful place and says appropriate things

Matthew 8:8 The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed."

The arrogance of the Word of Faith approach, the name it and claim it, is it advocates demanding things from Almighty God... it speaks against saying "If it is your will, Lord"... it advocates things like STORM THE GATES OF HEAVEN... I've always found that weird... like heaven is some enemy fortress and we need to storm heaven and plunder heaven for what we want

NO!! Humility of faith sees things as they really are—God is infinitely powerful, wise and loving; we are amazingly weak, ignorant, and selfish... we come humbly and ask for what is on our hearts as it lines up with His word

G. The Reward of Faith

Vs. 28 Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

1. Faith perseveres to get the reward... it perseveres until it obtains
2. Jesus made her wait some... he makes other people wait MORE; but true faith waits until it is answered

3. The ultimate reward of faith is this: eternity in heaven, not merely a physical healing
4. True faith receives everything God has promised

Ephesians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

IV. Christ's Power Put on Display

A. Faith Would Achieve Nothing if Not for Christ's Power

B. This Display of Power is ASTONISHING!!

Mark 7:28-30 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." 30 She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

1. The issue is the TIMING
2. When the woman had begun her statement, **“Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs”**, a powerful demon was inhabiting her daughter
3. Seconds later, when Jesus finished his statement, **“For such a reply, you may go; the demon HAS LEFT YOUR DAUGHTER”**... the demon was gone!
4. Instantaneous healing! Without Jesus speaking a word. Without Jesus uttering a prayer. Without any time delay... the demon had no chance to resist, no chance to make preparations to leave; overpowering spiritual force came on this evil being who was tormenting this daughter, and he was **THROWN OUT**
5. Demons are mighty; they are fallen angels; their power is vastly greater than we can imagine. But all Jesus had to do was **THINK IT**, and this demon was gone. No effort, no delay, no sweat and labor and toil. Effortless power.

C. A Picture of Our Forgiveness

Another woman came to Jesus and washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Her read her heart and saw her faith, and her repentance from sin

Luke 7:48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

IN AN INSTANT, a lifetime of sins is forgiven!!

D. A Picture of Our Resurrection into Glory

1 Corinthians 15:42-43 So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;

V. Application

A. Learn to Pray Like This

1. Do you care enough about others to take their case to Jesus

B. God's Silence

1. Sometimes God seems totally silent, and that can be a terrible trial
2. Be willing to persevere in prayer even when it seems nothing is happening

C. Learn the Lessons of Great Faith

1. Make sure your faith has a strong BASIS in the Word of God... find out HIS nature, HIS purposes, HIS promises, and base your faith on that
2. Be reverent in your approach to God... understand how exalted He is, and speak to Him accordingly
3. Be strengthened in your faith and grow in confidence... know that God can do IMMEASURABLY more than all you can ask or imaging, then ask confidently and trust Him to give you according to His will

4. Be repentant in your faith; let God speak to you of your sin and be humble and willing to hear what He says; do not be proud but be willing to ask for His mercy
 5. Be persistent... don't give up quickly
 6. Wait on God until you have your reward
- D. Stand in Awe... not at the power of FAITH but at the power of Christ!!
- E. Seek salvation from him!