



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for October 18, 2009
Released on Wednesday, October 14, 2009**

“Pleading for Mercy”

Lesson Text: Mark 7:24-30

Background Scripture: Mark 7:24-30

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Mark 7:24–30

24 And from thence he arose, and went into the borders of Tyre and Sidon, and entered into a house, and would have no man know it: but he could not be hid.

25 For a certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell at his feet:

26 The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation; and she besought him that he would cast forth the devil out of her daughter.

27 But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it unto the dogs.

28 And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children’s crumbs.

29 And he said unto her, For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter.

30 And when she was come to her house, she found the devil gone out, and her daughter laid upon the bed.

LESSON AIMS:

Facts: to show the details of how Jesus showed mercy to the Syrophenician woman and her little girl.

Principle: to know that the way to God is only through the door of His mercy.

Application: to see that we can access Jesus by pleading for His mercy in our needs.

INTRODUCTION

In this world it is not always easy to discern who is a friend and who is an enemy, who means us well and who means us harm. There is the silken-tongued politician who promises the world but only delivers more grief. On the other hand, there is the poorly spoken man who despite all appearances has a heart of gold and the best intentions.

It takes a great deal of wisdom to cut through the way things sound to what they really are. In the spiritual realm, the indispensable tool of discernment is faith. In our lesson text this week, Jesus spoke in a surprising way to test the faith of a supplicant.

The Lord Jesus was showing that a new standard of evaluation was needed if a person wanted to be a part of His kingdom. It would not be enough to conform to a certain set of external practices.

Hebrews 11:6 declares that "without faith it is impossible to please [God]: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently

seek him." As the old childhood mealtime prayer begins, "God is great. God is good." Do we have this childlike trust in Him no matter how much dark circumstances may cast doubt on the Lord's good intentions? Do we trust Christ enough to plead with Him for mercy?

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 29

Place: near Tyre

This week's lesson occurs in the area of Tyre and Sidon. These two cities were on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, to the north of Galilee. In the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon were notorious centers for the worship of the pagan god Baal. Jezebel, who married King Ahab of Israel and attempted to establish Baal as Israel's god, was the daughter of the king of Sidon (1 Kings 16:31). Thus for the Jewish people of Jesus' time, the region and its people were associated historically with the worst kind of paganism.

THE WOMAN'S REQUEST (Mark 7:24-26)

1. What was the historical significance of the region of Tyre and Sidon? (Mark 7:24)

Jesus had just finished dealing with the Pharisees and warning His disciples about His enemies' false view of spirituality (vs. 5-23). The incident that was about to unfold would explain from a fresh angle the distinction between true and false religion.

The place Jesus left was the region around the Sea of Galilee (cf. Mark 6:53-56). To get to the region of Tyre, He would have traveled to the northwest. The phrase "into the borders" (7:24) means simply that he went to the general vicinity of the two well-known Mediterranean seacoast towns of Tyre and Sidon. The outer limits of the region were about twenty miles from Capernaum. Where precisely in the area did Jesus meet with the woman in this passage? We do not know this for certain.

Tyre and Sidon had been the nerve center of the great Phoenician Empire that flourished in the days of Kings David and Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 5). The Phoenicians were a great commercial power, and at one time their cities were singled out to demonstrate the powerful nature of the future devastation of God's judgment (cf. Isa. 23:1-14).

By Jesus' day, Tyre and Sidon did not have the huge significance they once did, when Tyre was coveted and besieged by the likes of Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great. But they still were commercially important, and the population of Tyre was as large as Jerusalem's.

2. What was Jesus' intention when He entered a house of this region? (vs. 24)

Jesus entered a house (we know nothing of its owner) apparently with a desire for a time of rest and possibly teaching for His followers. As would happen on several occasions, however, secrecy could not be maintained.

Beginning way back in Mark 1, we see that Jesus cannot escape the attention of the crowds. Even when He commands silence about himself, He cannot keep His whereabouts a secret (*he could not be hid*). That fact makes the action that follows all the more noteworthy.

3. With what problem did the woman come to Jesus? (vs. 25-26)

A mother's love and a soon-to-be-apparent faith combined to impel a woman to unhesitatingly come to Jesus with an urgent request. She clearly comes to Jesus because she has heard that Jesus can cast out unclean spirits from those oppressed by them (see Mark 1:23-28; 3:11; 5:1-20).

Jesus' willingness to interact with a female in this way was in itself one of the striking features of His ministry. There was in Him none of the ancient world's prejudice against women.

The woman had a young daughter who was possessed by a demon. As mentioned in last week's lesson, demons were called unclean because of the moral pollution and evil they brought wherever they went. The woman showed humility and deference by falling at Jesus' feet.

4. What might explain the widespread problem of demon possession in the Palestine of Jesus' day?

We might well ask why there were so many cases of demon possession in first-century Palestine. For one thing, we may be underestimating the number of such possessions in the modern world, especially in cultures where Christian influence is weak. Our materialistic culture is quick to propose other explanations for demonic manifestations.

Another factor to consider about demonic activity in the New Testament is that the earthly ministry of Jesus was a crucial time of spiritual warfare in the world's history. We would expect the devil and his cohorts to be very focused on this region at this time.

5. What made Jesus' encounter with the woman so remarkable?

What made the encounter in this passage so remarkable was that the supplicant was not only a woman but a Gentile woman. The fact that the woman is a *Greek* means that she speaks Greek as her first language and adheres to the customs of the Greeks. Since the time of Alexander the Great (three centuries before Jesus' birth), the nations of the area have been dominated by that culture and language. This is so much the case that for a Jew in Jesus' time, all non-Jews can be loosely referred to as "Greeks" (example: Acts 19:10).

She is also described more specifically as a Syrophenician. Syria and Phoenicia are regions to Israel's north. The differences between the peoples of these two regions are slight. We can assume that many people identify their cultural heritage with both groups. But for Jews, both groups are seen as traditional enemies of Israel and as pagans. Though close neighbors in geography, they are worlds apart in their views of God.

So we wonder how Jesus will respond to a woman from this area. Will He turn her away because she is a foreigner who does not know the God of Israel? The stage is set for a dramatic moment.

THE WOMAN'S DIALOGUE WITH JESUS (Mark 7:27-30)

6. Why did Jesus respond to the woman with seeming coldness (v. 27)?

According to Matthew's account, Jesus' first words to the woman were "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). The surprising distance and seeming coldness in the response are consistent with Mark's account of Jesus' approach to the woman. Her faith, however, would trust in Him despite the unpromising reply. Jesus was testing her faith and teaching His disciples.

Jesus continued along a line that might have caused the woman to wonder whether He was going to grant her request. We do not have the benefit of knowing Jesus' facial expression or tone of voice as He made His surprising response to her request, but from His words it *seemed* He was saying that she did not qualify for help or at least that she needed to wait her turn for a while. The children should be fed first. What He said did not seem consistent with the love He has for all the peoples of the world (cf. John 3:16). But that was the point. People of faith know that Jesus loves them.

It is true that Israel occupied a special place in God's plan and that the gospel was brought first to the Jews (cf. Matt. 10:5-6). What Jesus said was also consistent with what the Pharisees believed and the disciples naturally thought. This would make the ultimate result of this encounter an effective teaching counterpoint to the Pharisees.

7. What did Jesus mean by the term "dogs" (Mark 7:27)?

The term "dogs" is often a term of reproach in the Bible (cf. Matt. 7:6; Rev. 22:15). In most cases, the animals referred to as dogs were unclean scavengers who roamed the streets. In this case, however, Jesus' term refers to domestic dogs, a very different kind of creature that is not viewed as loathsome. So Jesus is not employing the kind of insulting language that some others do.

Further, Jesus does not say that "the dogs" will receive none of the food from the table. The children must eat *first*, and then the dogs may be fed. He does not say that the Gentiles have no share in God's blessings, though He does say that the blessings are offered first to Israel. His words suggest that the Gentiles will also receive the food once it has been offered to the Jews first.

This order in the offer of salvation is reflected elsewhere in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, the gospel is first preached to the Jewish people (Acts 1-9) before it is offered to the Gentiles (Acts 10). In Romans 1:16, Paul says that the gospel is given "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

Still, with all these considerations, Jesus appears to be rebuffing the woman's request. But how we understand that rebuff depends on what follows in the conversation.

8. How did the woman interpret Jesus' statement about the dogs?

Jesus' statement did not seem too promising. He did, however, by speaking of a pet dog rather than a filthy wild dog, leave the woman with a glimmer of hope. And with all the resourcefulness of a worried mother, she seized on it. She noted that even though pets would not be served the food first, they were permitted to eat the crumbs that might fall to the floor. The woman was taking Jesus' analogy and using it to press her request. Jesus had said that the children should eat first, but as William Lane remarked, "If the dogs eat the crumbs under the table, they are fed *at the same time* as the children (and do not have to wait, as implied by the affirmation in verse 27a)" (*The Gospel According to Mark*, Eerdmans).

The woman was not being disrespectful. She addressed Jesus with humility and with no protest concerning her assumed position in relation to the Jews. Alexander Maclaren nicely summarized the woman's words: "What a constellation of graces sparkles in her ready reply! There is humility in accepting the place He gives her; insight in seeing at once a new plea in what might have sent her away despairing; persistence in pleading; confidence that He can grant her request and that He would gladly do so" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Doran). Note, then, that her faith was in Jesus' power and His goodness. This is what we trust in as well. He is able to save us, and He desires to.

In fact, Jesus does have love for all peoples, and with His illustration, He had not ruled out entirely reaching beyond the children of Israel. The woman showed by her response that she was in tune with the Lord's heart.

9. How can we follow the woman's example in our approach to the Lord with our requests?

As a cultural "outsider," this mother showed great boldness in bringing her request for healing to Jesus. Yet her attitude was one of submission and humility. We are encouraged to "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Clothed in the righteousness

of Jesus Christ, we are welcomed into God's holy presence. We know that our loving Father will provide for our needs. However, we must always come with reverence for God's mighty power and with a humble, submissive spirit by which we make requests, not demands. In addition, we can say as Jesus did, "not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

10. How did Jesus respond to the way the woman had taken His words?

Jesus seemed to take great pleasure in the woman's answer. He directly linked His granting of the request with what she had said ("For this saying"). The Matthew passage notes that Jesus also said, "O woman, great is thy faith" (15:28). Jesus' answer affirms her faith. She expresses the kind of trust to which Jesus consistently responds. Those who believe they have all they need are not ready to receive God's blessing. Those who know that they have no means of helping themselves are the ones who can receive God's blessing.

As we hear Jesus' response, we realize that His harsh words to the woman may be something different from what we first thought. Elsewhere in Mark, Jesus shows that He knows what people are thinking before they speak (Mark 2:8). He also challenges people with difficult sayings and proposals (Mark 6:37). It is very possible that Jesus, knowing the faith that she will express, deliberately challenges the woman with His response about children and dogs.

If so, then Jesus is acting for the benefit not only of the woman but also of all who overhear, especially His disciples. For any who think that by their position they have a special claim on God's blessing, this exchange offers the opposite conclusion. Jesus is saying that He comes for those who know that they are weak and lost, who recognize that they have nowhere else to turn.

That is a truth that needs to be heard by those who believe themselves to be so far from God as to be beyond His mercy. It also needs to be heard by those who have been in the church so long that they have forgotten that they are sinners who stand by God's grace, not their own goodness.

11. What lesson can we learn from the woman's interaction with Jesus?

There is a great lesson for us in this account. The Lord desires for us to bravely and confidently interact with Him. If we understand Him truly, we have nothing to fear. We of course are to approach Him with respect and humility, but He wants us to speak our mind as we would to a close friend.

Jesus told the woman that her daughter was healed. Just as was the case with the centurion mentioned earlier, the Lord did not even need to be where the afflicted person was to affect the cure! The power of Christ's word, which spoke the world into existence, was more than sufficient to cast out the demon from whatever distance. This was yet another method recorded in the Gospels for working miracles. What made the difference was not the method but the One who employed it. This particular method does highlight, however, the sovereignty of Christ over the spirit world and should offer encouragement to us in our spiritual battles.

12. In what condition did the woman find her daughter at her home?

When the woman went home, she discovered that her daughter had indeed been delivered. Matthew adds the detail that she had been rescued "from that very hour" (15:28), which of course does not surprise us but again serves to emphasize the greatness of Christ's power.

The woman found the daughter on her bed. This conveys to us a sense of peace and restored calm, especially as we remember demon possessions like that of the man of Gadara (from last week's lesson).

Through the exercise of His power, Christ had shown the importance of faith and the comprehensive reach of His love, which extends to all peoples. His disciples had seen a new paradigm of ministry at work, and we today receive the encouragement to trust fully in Him.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Effective ministry often requires times of seclusion and rest (Mark 7:24).
2. God's work is not limited by ethnic or national boundaries (vss. 25-26).
3. If our faith is never challenged, it will never grow strong and consistent (vs. 27).
4. Persistence is a mark of genuine faith (vs. 28).
5. Our requests become effective when made in faith (Mark 7:29; cf. Jas. 1:5-6; 5:16-18).
6. Prayer and believing God's word are the most effective weapons against Satan's attacks (Mark 7:30).

CONCLUSION

Jesus used His encounter with the Syrophenician woman to show us the kind of person who can receive His salvation. If we imagine that we have good standing with God because of who we are or what we have done, we place ourselves beyond the reach of God's grace. But when we recognize how helpless we are and how deeply we need what only Jesus can give, He is ready to give us exactly what we need.

The people who most needed this lesson in the first century were Jesus' closest followers. That is a caution to us! It is easy for us to become proud, self-satisfied, and self-reliant when we have known the Lord for a long time. We can become so accustomed to belonging to Him that we forget how we became His in the first place. To receive His blessing, we have to get over ourselves and learn to trust Him completely.

PRAYER

Father, when we are honest with ourselves, we realize that we are helpless, needy sinners. We can only cry out to You for Your mercy and grace. Thank You for Jesus, who came to bless needy people like us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"Little ones to Him belong" ("Jesus Loves Me," lyrics by Anna B. Warner, 1860)

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "**True Treasure Costs**". The lesson will demonstrate that what man sees as really important is not what God values. Study Mark 10:17-31.

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