

EATING WITH THE DOGS

In a book about broken relationships and broken hearts, there's a story about the street vendors in Hong Kong. Amid all the aggressive, high-pressure street vendors trying to sell anything and everything, a man sat silently beside his push-cart. When asked what he was selling, he replied, "I don't sell anything. Instead, I buy things. I buy broken things. My joy comes in fixing what is broken."¹

Even a quick read of the accounts of Jesus' life reveals that Jesus is among us as one who buys broken things to fix them. Jesus finds joy in healing and saving broken people.

"And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts." Matthew 16:22.

The Bible described this woman in 3 ways: She was (1) of Canaan, (2) a Greek, and (3) Syrophoenician by nation. As a Canaanite she would be automatically considered Israel's enemy. Joshua was told to drive out the Canaanites from the promised land but was not totally successful, so the Canaanites became a thorn in Israel's side. As a Greek, she was born Gentile and not a Jew in any way, and being Syrophoenician in nationality, she becomes even further removed from the privileged position enjoyed by Israelites.

These three descriptions of her background tell us that she was (1) completely outside the circle of God's special blessing experienced only by the chosen people, and (2) paganistic in every way—a worshiper of idols and practitioner of the occult. You need to understand the very dark religious background of the Canaanites. The Canaanites had a very extensive pantheon of gods (very much like Hinduism). They worshiped chiefly Baal and Baal takes on different forms. There are male and female versions of Baal and many gods and goddesses of sex and war, with many smaller deities. It is a religion that appealed to the lusts of the flesh. Their temples are filled with priestesses who served as prostitutes. They also offer human sacrifices.

Serving her gods has left her totally without hope. Instead of being helped she has been devastated by her religion. It is not surprising that such dark heathen practices has resulted in her daughter being demon-possessed. You can be sure that she has asked her heathen priests to save her daughter but evidently none of them was able to

¹ Terry Hershey, *Beginning Again: Life After a Relationship Ends*, p. 10-11.

help. She was left totally hopeless. That is what Satan does, he seduces us to worship him, and finally when we take the bait, we are done for—he leaves us for dead.

There is a warning here for Christians too. Although we can never be demon-possessed, we can be attacked by demons if we give them the opportunity. Example: a young Christian couple who got baptized found the husband grew violent in behavior, plagued by the fear of darkness, had thoughts of suicide, and would not want to read the Bible or pray when they brought home a statue given to them by a Hindu priest for donating money to build a Hindu temple. They did not want to throw the statue or idol away because it was decked with semi-precious stones and looked very beautiful. It was not until it was thrown away that the trouble left.

“And cried unto Him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.” Matthew 15:22.

Listen to her plea, “have mercy on me!” Can you imagine how her daughter’s situation must have weighed on her motherly heart, the hours of tears and prayers, the sleepless nights, the frantic days trying to find help for her daughter?

Have you ever walked through Children’s Hospital? You see the children with their hair out because of chemotherapy, with IV in their arms, being pushed around in wheelchairs. It’s heart wrenching. Imagine yourself in that woman’s shoes. If you’re a mom, I suspect, you’re already right there with her.

To make matters worse, it was a demon that was tormenting this woman’s daughter! Obviously, this woman knew and understood the import of spiritual things. What every Spirit-filled mother wants more than anything is to know that her child is also a child of heaven. To know that an evil spirit was living inside and exerting some kind of control over her daughter—I would think that it would be more than a mother could handle.

What a perfect picture of what goes on in the heart of God, when we, His children, are hurt, lost, led-astray, or, at times, even controlled by the evil of this world. The devil tries to conjure up a picture of God as nothing more than a galactic ruler-maker who’s just waiting to zap people when they cross over the line He’s drawn in the sand. The reality is that God’s heart is a lot more like the heart of a mother—a heart that’s breaking over the lost condition we’re in.

This mother's love drove her to find help for her daughter and there was nothing that she wouldn't be willing to endure or sacrifice to get that help. If we didn't know that she was mother and that her daughter was in this kind of condition, we might wonder at why she remained so determined to get what she was looking for from Jesus with the way He was responding to her. He compares her to a dog! Yet, because she's a mother, we do understand.

That's God's kind of love. Look at what God has to put up with throughout the centuries. No matter how many times He reaches out to help the people of this world, no matter how many miracles He performs, no matter how many times He rescues us, we keep turning away and forgetting His love. He pours out blessing upon blessing and we turn around and give the thanks and glory He deserves to some worthless idol. Or we dishonor His name by committing every ungodly vice imaginable.

Like a mother who loves her child no matter what he does, God's love cannot be thwarted! His love only spurred Him on. Taking on the frailty of His children's flesh and blood, He came to live in this sin-cursed world with all its tears and troubles. He subjected Himself to the scorn and wrath of the people who hated Him. He took the punishment and suffering they deserved on Himself. He died so that they—so that we—could live. Talk about a determined love!

Years ago, (true story!) a young mother was making her way across the hills of South Wales, carrying her tiny baby in her arms, when she was overtaken by a blinding blizzard. She never reached her destination. When the blizzard subsided, her body was found beneath a mound of snow. They discovered that before her death, she had taken off all her outer clothing and wrapped it around her baby.

When they unwrapped the child, to their great surprise, they found he was alive and well. She had mounded her body over his and given her life for her child, proving the depths of her mother love. That's God's kind of love—a determined, sacrificing love.

It was this woman's love that drove her to find help for her daughter. It was her faith that moved her to bring her daughter to Jesus. It was her faith that kept her determined to cling to Jesus despite the things that Jesus said to her at first. She knew and believed that Jesus could help her daughter.

I know there are plenty of mothers like her out there, mothers who know that Jesus is the only one who can truly help their children, who pray earnestly that their children remain close to Jesus, or, if they

have wandered, these mothers are on their knees before God praying that somehow, someday, the Lord would lead them back home.

“But He answered her not a word.” Matthew 15:23. Jesus had specifically gone to this region for the express purpose of seeking this woman. She had come to Him in response to His seeking her. A temple dedicated to Eshmun, a god of healing, was located three miles northwest of Sidon. This woman was likely familiar with the pagan deity, but Jesus’ reputation has preceded Him, and she comes instead to Jesus for healing for her daughter.

Jesus does not reply to the woman’s cry for help, which the disciples apparently take as His way of rebuffing the woman’s request. Her persistence is an annoyance. Furthermore, it is attracting unwelcome attention from the public.

I remember people in my life who have ignored me. When I a youngster, a minister visited our home for dinner. He was doing evangelism for my father in the church. I had great respect for this elder, but he believed in the philosophy that children should be seen and not heard. So whenever I tried to enter the conversation he completely ignored me. I figured out real quick how important I was in his eyes.

Maybe this woman might have been tempted to think the same of Jesus’ ignoring her. She wasn’t even worth the time of day.

“And His disciples came and besought Him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.” Matthew 15:23. They picked up on Jesus’ indifference and took it as a signal that He should get rid of her. They did not know the Master as well as the woman did, for she was not at all disheartened by His silence, but continued pressing her request.

To add insult to injury He said to her—“I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Matthew 15:24. But this saying, instead of repelling her, made her still more bold, and “she came and worshiped Him, saying, Lord, help me.” Matt. 15:25.

The Canaanite woman’s love is not the only determined love we see in this text. Although it may only be visible through the eyes of faith, Jesus also displays His heavenly Father’s determined love.

People have a hard time understanding why Jesus treated this woman as He did. At first, He didn’t even reply. Then He basically told her that she wasn’t someone he had come to minister to. That doesn’t sound like the “reach out and love everyone Jesus” we know.

Yet, think for a moment about a mother’s love. A mother always wants what is best for her child. She knows that her child will

sometimes have to learn the important lessons in life the hard way. It may not look like love to people on the outside, but to the child who knows and trusts his mother's love, deep down he knows it's love.

When we understand that Jesus, who knows all, who sees into the heart of this woman, who sees the faith that is there, and an opportunity to strengthen her faith—when we understand that Jesus is determined to draw this woman closer to Him, Jesus' actions take on a whole different look.

In our lives, so often, the reality looks completely different from what God promises. God can seem distant, like He's abandoned us. He can seem silent, unwilling to answer our prayers. He can seem uncompassionate, not desiring to grant us relief when we're struggling in life. It's at those times that God's love is determined to strengthen our faith, to help us grow, to teach us through experience that we can trust what He says no matter how it looks. That's what Jesus is reminding us of through this account today.

That's why I find this account incredibly encouraging. To see this woman's faith, to see it stand up through this test, is a testimony to what God's determined love can do in our lives. I don't know about you, but often I feel that I'm way too weak to make it through any real test or trial in my life—especially when I see what this woman went through or when I see what God asks some of you to go through.

Faith is always tested. God always allows room for someone to choose doubt, to question. We could go on down through the list of patriarchs and prophets all the way from Abraham, the father of the faithful, to Daniel. Every last one of them was tested. And Jesus was no exception. He lived by faith and God tested Him.

But this text reminds me that it's not about me. Faith is a gift from God, a gift that He pours out on me every time He feeds me with his Word and strengthens me.

Jesus knew how far He could test this woman. He knew her limits. He knows ours as well. And He is faithful. "He will not let [us] be tempted beyond what [we] can bear." 1 Corinthians 10:13.

"But He answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs." Matthew 15:26. The children were the house of Israel. The dogs were the Gentile heathen idol worshipers.

Now I happen to be a dog lover. I would feed a dog table scraps at the drop of a hat. In fact, I can remember times as a kid when the food served us children wasn't so appealing. So when no one was

looking I would sneak it under the table with my hand and my dog Rip was always there to get me out of a jam.

There are very few for whom these words of Jesus would not have been enough. Even if they had persevered this far with Him, by now they would have turned away in anger or despair. But she is mighty in faith. She believes that their paths have crossed for a purpose. This is no chance encounter. And from these words of Jesus that she is a dog she draws with the ready wit of faith an argument in her own behalf. She entangles the Lord, Himself most willing to be so entangled, in his own speech. She takes the sword out of His own hand, with which to overcome Him.

“And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Matthew 15:27. Even the dogs get the crumbs and she wants her portion! Wasn’t that a master-stroke? She snares Christ in His own words.

We can learn from her how to wring a “Yes” from God’s “No.” Or, rather, we may learn how to hear the deep-hidden “Yes,” which many times lurks under His seeming “No.” Like her, we must give God the right of way in all He says against us, and yet we must not break off from praying, until we overcome as she overcame, until we have turned the very charges made against us into arguments and proofs of our great need, until we too have snared Christ in His own words.

She saw in His very declaration the granting of her petition. “Did you say dogs? That’s fine. I accept the title and the place, for the dogs have a portion too. Maybe not the first portion, not the children’s portion, but nevertheless a portion, yet even the crumbs which fall from the masters’ table. Since you have put it this way, You bring us heathen, You bring me, within the circle of the blessings which God, the great Householder, is ever dispensing to His family. We also belong to His household, though we occupy but the lowest place therein. According to your own showing, I am not wholly an alien. So I will abide by this name ‘dog’ and will claim all which it is entitled to.”

You see in those days the whelps did eat of the crumbs which fell from their masters’ table. The crumbs were more than the accidental offal from the table. It was common at meals to use, instead of a napkin, the softer parts of the bread, which were afterwards thrown to the dogs. After wiping their hands on the bread, they threw it to the dogs.

“Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.” Matthew 15:28.

The woman believed. She has conquered at last. She, who before heard only those words of a seeming contempt, now hears words of a most gracious commendation, “Great is thy faith.” He who showed at first as though He would have denied her the smallest tidbit, now opens to her the full treasure-house of His grace, and bids her to hold herself, to carry away what she will. “Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.”

Like the centurion at Capernaum (Mt. 8:13), like the nobleman at Cana (John 4:53), she made proof that His word was as effectual spoken far off as well as near. She offered in her faith a channel of communication between her distant child and Christ. With one hand of that faith she laid hold on Him in whom all healing grace was stored, with the other on her suffering daughter,—herself a living conductor by which the power of Christ might run, like an electric flash, from Him to the object of her love.

She at once went her way satisfied, and found her daughter healed. “And when she was come to her house, she found the devil gone out, and her daughter laid upon the bed.” Mark 7:30. She was now taking that quiet rest, which before her condition had excluded.

The first lesson taught by this scripture is that every one who believes the Lord is by his faith an Israelite. Jesus said that He was sent to none but the lost sheep of the house of Israel, yet He immediately granted that Gentile woman’s request, and seems to have been sent to that region by the Spirit for that express purpose. The words and the act, taken together, show that the Gentile woman was one of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. In the tenth chapter of John we learn who are the sheep of Christ’s fold. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” John 10:27. Anyone who will follow Jesus and who is willing to receive life from Him, is one of His sheep. If people would but consider this one incident, it would settle all the controversy concerning Israel. It is not any special race or nation on earth, but those in all nations who seek and find the Lord as their personal Saviour.

Did Jesus call the woman a little dog? Not by any means. He simply made an abstract statement; it was the woman herself who seized upon it, and applied it to herself; and by so doing she made her case sure. Pride seeks to exalt itself, but faith is humble. It would be in

keeping with the spirit of the natural man to say after such a saying, "I am not a dog." How quickly we assert our dignity. How natural for us to make out as good a case as possible for ourselves; but this woman was wiser; she had the wisdom of humility. She wasted no time telling how worthy she was, but showed Jesus that according to His own words she had a just claim; for, admitting that the children's bread ought not to be given to the dogs, and even tacitly admitting herself to be a dog, she still had a right to the crumbs. Meekness and lowliness of spirit win where pride and self-esteem fail. It is better to be considered a dog, and to get all that we need, than to assert our claim to honor and dignity, and to get nothing. "A living dog is better than a dead lion."

Christ's words and actions showed that He considered the woman to be one of the children, and not one of the little dogs. It was true, as He said, that it is not fitting to give the children's food to the dogs, and the Lord will not do that; but He gave to that woman the best that He had, and in so doing He robbed nobody else. Therefore it is clear that He owned her as one of the children of God.

Such faith as the woman had is very rare. The same may be said of the quickness of her perception. But this faith and wisdom were the result of her humility. "With the lowly is wisdom." Proverbs 11:2. She had a very humble opinion of herself, and that made her wise in the things of God. She showed that she knew the value of heavenly gifts. When Jesus said that the children's bread ought not to be given to dogs, she went straight to the main point, and indicated that she would be satisfied with the crumbs that nobody else would notice. That which others would consider too trifling to be worth any attention, would be sufficient for her, if it came from God. The least thing from Him is great. A crumb from the Lord's table is enough to feed a multitude. "A little that a righteous man hath is better than the treasures of many wicked." Psalm 37:16. The woman's reply showed that she had a just sense of the fullness of God in Christ. In Christ the small and great unite in one. A crumb means a feast, and a moment comprehends eternity.

One thing more. It is a lesson concerning the power of genuine faith in God. Jesus said, "O woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt." This shows us that true faith can have anything it desires. True faith will not desire anything that is not good, and God cannot withhold any good thing. It is impossible to believe too much in God. We cannot have too strong faith, nor can our faith in God

grasp too much. We can have all that we believe for. God is infinite in goodness, and in the power to do good. The greatness of His goodness is unsearchable. We cannot think of anything too hard for Him to do, that will exhaust His generosity. "He cannot deny Himself," and therefore whatever good thing we believe that He will do, must be done.

Faith in God makes great optimists. Over in Burma, Adoniram Judson was lying in a foul jail with 32 lbs. of chains on his ankles, his feet bound to a bamboo pole. A fellow prisoner said, "Dr. Judson, what about the prospect of the conversion of the heather?" with a sneer on his face. His instant reply was, "The prospects are just as bright as the promises of God."

During an especially trying time in the work of the China Inland Mission, Hudson Taylor wrote to his wife, "We have twenty-five cents—and all the promises of God!"

Some people—professed Christians, too, even ministers—seem to be afraid that people will believe too much, and will claim too great things from God. Instead of inciting people to believe without limit, they are continually in a fear of anxiety lest they become fanatical. But it is impossible for perfect faith and fanaticism to go together. Faith comes by the Word of God, and fanaticism comes from neglecting the Word. So think of every good thing that you can; call to mind everything that you could possibly desire, not to satisfy your feelings, but to make you better, and then know that God is able and willing to do "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us." Ephesians 3:20.

A friend has been under a very severe medical problem and was under very heavy medication. She describes it with a very interesting comment. It's a very, very dark experience to go through with all this medication. But it gives me a great deal of compassion for others who have to do the same thing. It's like a chemically induced experience of what it might be like (what it will be like) to go through the last days of earth's history. You do not feel God's presence when you are under this heavy medication. You simply have to believe without any evidence of any brightness or warmth or comfort. Everything inside you is screaming that you are lost. It's only in believing God's promises that holds your head above the waters."

Yes, God's people in the very last days are going to go through such an experience when everything screams at them, You're lost. God has forgotten you. Or there is no God. Only maybe Babylon is the

only way out. And in that dark hour the 144,000 will believe when they feel no evidence for it. They will believe because they share the character of God which is *agape*.

Therefore to Him be the glory in Christ Jesus, throughout all ages world without end.