

True Prayer Confesses and Trusts

Matthew 15:21-28

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Hymn: *ELH* #257 – “When in the Hour of Utmost Need”

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, you have promised your grace to the whole world, and you have died for all sinners. I am in need of your grace and forgiveness. Grant it to me, and give me the faith to believe that it is truly mine. In your name I pray. Amen.

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!”

²³But he did not answer her a word.

His disciples came and pleaded, “Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us.”

²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

²⁵But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

²⁶He answered her, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

²⁷“Yes, Lord,” she said, “yet the dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire.” And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

Dear faithful,

Lutheran theologian C. F. W. Walther wrote: “The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel.”¹ Ultimately, he describes also the difference between the effects of the two doctrines:

In the first place, the Law tells us what to do, but does not enable us to comply with its commands.... In the second place, the Law uncovers to man his sins, but offers him no help to get out of them and thus hurls man into despair. In

¹ C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, translated by W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 1.

the third place, the Law does indeed produce contrition. It conjures up the terrors of hell, of death, of the wrath of God. But it has not a drop of comfort to offer the sinner.²

The effects of the Gospel are of an entirely different nature. They consist in this, that, in the first place, the Gospel, when demanding faith, offers and gives us faith in that very demand. When we preach to people: Do believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, God gives them faith through our preaching.... The second effect of the Gospel is that it does not at all reprove the sinner, but takes all terror, all fear, all anguish, from him and fills him with peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.... In the third place, the Gospel does not require anything good that man must furnish: not a good heart, not a good disposition, no improvement of his condition, no godliness, no love either of God or men. It issues no orders, but it changes man. It plants love into his heart and makes him capable of all good works. It demands nothing, but it gives all.³

God wishes to communicate to us in both of these doctrines. According to our human nature, due to our inheritance as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, we are under the curse of death and hell. We also sin daily in thought, word, and deed, continually deserving God's wrath and punishment. As he himself said, "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:5-6, ESV). The question God demands you ask yourself in light of his Law is, how do you measure up? Do your deeds deserve for you that God would visit your iniquities upon you, as well as the iniquities of your fathers? or do your deeds deserve that God would give you love? There's no in-

² Ibid., 13-14.

³ Ibid., 15-16.

between. There's no middle option. You deserve one or the other: wrath or love.

Which do you deserve?

According to Christ Jesus' life and sacrifice, the record of our debt God "set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14, ESV). It is for this reason that St. Paul writes, and we, too, can confess: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16, ESV).

God's Word asks us to believe these two things: You deserve from God only wrath and no love or mercy; you receive from God only love and mercy and no wrath. This was the prayer of the Canaanite woman in our Gospel text. Her true prayer both confessed her unworthiness, and trusted in Jesus' mercy. We pray the same things, as in one form of the Confession of Sin at the beginning of worship states: "we poor sinners confess unto You that we are by nature sinful and unclean," and yet we also pray, "O merciful God, You still grant us in this hour to be reminded of Your fatherly goodness."⁴

I. We Are by Nature Sinful and Unclean

Before coming to the district of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus discoursed on what really defiles a person, saying: "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.... For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person" (Matt. 15:10-11, 19-20, ESV). All mankind is

⁴ *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1996), 41.

lumped together in this, for Jesus implies, if he doesn't directly state, that every human heart is wicked and sinful. Every action, and every word, is a sin, declares Jesus. Yes, we are, by our nature, sinful and unclean, and this means that everything we do, think, or say is sinful and unclean, and just adds mud onto our already filthy, stained clothes.

When we come to see the situation of the Canaanite woman, we hear her crying out, "A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!" In Mark's account, the demon is called "an unclean spirit" (Mark 7:25, ESV). The reader is meant to draw the connection from Jesus' discourse to the Canaanite woman's daughter, that uncleanness ought to be blamed on the heart of the one who is unclean.

If that is the case, then Jesus' response is understandable, when "he did not answer her a word." She and her daughter were sinful. What right did they have to approach God?

Besides, as Jesus states, he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This woman was a Canaanite, one of those ancient peoples from whom the Israelites had wrested the Promised Land. Not only was she unclean, but she wasn't even one of God's people. Jesus is preaching the Law here. Like all mankind, she and her daughter were unclean and deserving of God's wrath. Even when God sent redemption, he sent it to Israel, and she was undeserving of being saved along with Israel.

But this was all done for the benefit of this dear woman, and in the hearing of the disciples for their benefit, and recorded for our benefit. This is because, even though the woman is undeserving, and Jesus tells her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," she knows it. She says, "Yes, Lord." Even as she

petitions Jesus to remember his mercifulness, she remembers her own sinfulness and unworthiness. We must learn to do the same thing: as we ask God to remember his promise of mercy toward us, we must remember our own sin.

The disciples, it seems, did not understand this fact. They had not understood the force of the message Jesus had only just preached. They thought Jesus was not helping this woman, even though he had helped so many others, because she was a Canaanite and many of the others were Israelites. The disciples judged the hearts of Israel as worthy of love, while the heart of this Canaanite woman and her daughter was not. The difference, they saw, was of nationality and obedience to the civil and ceremonial laws of the Torah. For example, the Israelites did not eat unclean foods, but the Canaanites did. But again, Jesus had only just said, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person" (Matt. 15:10-11, ESV). How the disciples should have judged this situation is that neither the Israelites nor the Canaanites, neither they nor this woman, neither we nor our unbelieving neighbors, are deserving of love. My dad used to tell me, when I needed humbling, that we Christians are no better than non-Christians. We're just forgiven.

This woman understood this. She had heard the reports of Jesus, the great miracle-worker, no doubt. She had apparently even come to the conclusion that he was the Messiah of Israel, for she addressed him: "Lord, Son of David"! And she knew that she was undeserving of love or mercy or anything from Christ, for when he called her a dog, she said, "Yes, Lord."

Her faith, and our faith, is not based on anything in ourselves. We are not *deserving* of love, but we are by nature sinful and unclean, and all our deeds, words, and thoughts are sinful and unclean: our hearts are sinful and unclean. However, we may confess as this woman does: “yet the dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Her faith, and our faith, is earnestly founded in the mercy of Jesus.

II. We Are Still Reminded in This Hour of God’s Fatherly Goodness

This is the Gospel message, which was Jesus’ purpose in coming: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8, ESV). We may pray and petition our God boldly, brashly, annoyingly, like this Canaanite woman, not because we deserve it (we are sinners and by nature enemies of God), but because of God himself, because he had revealed himself to be merciful and forgiving. Specifically, we petition our God for good things because he has sent his Son Jesus Christ and punished sin in him. He took our sin, our “record of debts...nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14, ESV).

This woman’s faith was in the compassion of God. She understood both how low she was by nature and how great God’s mercy was, that she believed that even the crumbs of grace would be sufficient to save her daughter. Believe these three things, therefore: we are sinners, through and through; God is merciful, having punished our sins in Christ and not in ourselves; God is almighty, so full of power that even the scraps of grace can save you.

But you are not given the scraps. God’s grace is so full, and his power so great, that the forgiveness which Jesus won on the cross is for all people of all nations across

all time. That means that you are provided a full portion of grace, so that you can sing with David, “my cup overflows” (Ps. 23:5, ESV).

Sin and grace. Understanding both of these doctrines, these facts, then you know how to pray aright, as this Canaanite woman prayed: Pray sincerely, knowing your sin. Pray humbly, knowing your unworthiness. Pray in faith, knowing what Jesus did on your behalf. Pray in confidence and persistence, knowing what God has promised to you for his sake.

“Woman, your faith is great!” Jesus said. It was not the size of her faith that earned a miracle, however. It was the object of that faith. Jesus was her Lord and Master, her Savior. She had faith in him and his mercy, and her prayers were answered.

And look at how great and overflowing was the mercy and grace of Jesus: after this woman’s daughter was freed from the oppressive demon, “great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them” (Matt. 15:30, ESV). Immediately following this, Jesus performed one of his more famous miracles, feeding four thousand men on seven loaves of bread and a few small fish, so that there were seven huge baskets full of the leftovers. Truly, the mercy of God surpasses our understanding or our calculation! The crumbs from that table will satisfy you to eternity!

All this faith, in Matthew’s Gospel, is contrasted with the following story at the beginning of chapter 16: “the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven” (Matt. 16:1, ESV). The faith of this Canaanite

woman, and of all those people who brought their sick and their hunger to Jesus is contrasted with the doubt of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who won't believe until they *see* it.

Our faith has "*seen*" Jesus' grace. He died on the cross. He rose from the dead. That was for you. The Gospel accounts of these events "are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31, ESV). We've heard reports, as the Canaanite woman heard reports. Our faith rests on the mercy of God as proclaimed in these reports. We know that we will "inherit the kingdom prepared for [us] from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34, ESV), not because we deserve it, but because Jesus gives it to us out of his mercy. Therefore we take all our concerns, all our prayers, to Jesus. We confess that we are sinful, and we trust that God is merciful. Our prayers are answered according to God's will, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.

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