



THE ROAD TO BLESSING

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
March 29th, 2009*

You might think superheroes are made up, but Spiderman made a live appearance in Bangkok this week and actually rescued someone. There was a young autistic boy who was having a panic attack on his first day of school, and he climbed out onto a third story balcony. He kept dangling his feet off the edge. He was hysterical and wouldn't let firefighters or teachers or even his mom get anywhere near him.

One of the firefighters overheard the mom saying how much her son liked comic books, and that gave him an idea. They kept a Spiderman costume at the fire station to liven up school fire drills, so the firefighter quickly went back and changed into the costume and returned to the scene.

As soon as the boy saw Spiderman he calmed down. The firefighter told him he had come to save him from the monsters and nobody could hurt him now. All he had to do was walk slowly to him. And that's exactly what he did, with a big smile on his face.

Here this boy had all these people there ready to help him, but it took a rescuer in disguise to finally reach him and bring him to safety. The firefighter could only do his job by becoming unrecognizable.

Every once in a while, I hit a story in Scripture where at first, God seems unrecognizable to me. Last week we looked at one of my very favorite passages from Mark, where Jesus heals the sick woman and raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. Christ just oozes compassion and tenderness in the way he handles the situation.

Today we come to a very similar but very different story. It's another concerned parent, but this time, Jesus looks and sounds almost mean. When you first read through it, it makes you a little uncomfortable because it strikes a harsh note on our ears.

As I was grappling with the text, trying to make sense of it, I thought, if Jesus doesn't change who he is or what he's about, then this must be Jesus in disguise. He must know something I don't about the person he is wanting to rescue, because his approach works – even though it looks completely different from anything we've seen so far.

Matthew 15:21-28

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

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

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

See what I mean? It's a little jarring to read through that. What do we do with these sections of the Bible that aren't easy to understand?

Personally, I like the fact that not all Scripture verses fit on a greeting card. When I have to work at grasping what God is getting at, that tells me he's bigger than me. David Plotz is the author of a new book called *Good Book* – which is all about the Bible, written from a Jewish perspective. And he says this: "The joy and the richness of the Book come from fighting with it."

He's on to something. There is mystery beyond my small mind, and it forces me to dig into it more deeply than I would if it were simple to understand. And I firmly believe that each story is worth the work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another — showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way.

There is always truth to be found, even in the sections that we find troubling or difficult. I would even go so far as to say that sometimes the stories that require the most from us also have the greatest rewards at the other end. And what I discovered as I dug further and further into today's passage was that it has some incredible things to say to us.

This is the only time Matthew records Jesus as going to the city of Tyre. It was a Gentile city, not Jewish, located in what is today southern Lebanon. If you're wondering what took Jesus there, all you have to do is look at a picture from modern day Tyre or find it on a map. It's a beach town – right on the Mediterranean. And like our high schoolers did a couple weeks ago, Christ was taking his disciples on a retreat. This was a necessary

thing for their souls. They had been working hard. Their schedule was filled with travel, the stress of opposition, feeding the five thousand, grieving the murder of John the Baptist, being pressed by the needy crowds day after day. They were ready for some time away. Mark spells it out very clearly for us when he tells the story:

Mark 7:24

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it...

The whole point was to get away from it all – to rest and focus on his disciples. He was going to spend some time teaching just them, without the interruptions and distractions that go with a public ministry. All through the gospels, Jesus frequently took time to be by himself, to recharge and pray. He knew how to rest well and he didn't apologize for it or feel guilty about it. That's a whole sermon in itself someday.

That's the context for this interaction, which may in part explain why Jesus reacted differently to this opportunity than he did for some other miracles. He's in a different mode. His being God gave him power to do anything, but his humanity confined him to being in one place at one time, so he had to prioritize his activities. And at this particular moment in time, his focus was on feeding into his disciples in a more exclusive way.

Somehow, though, word leaked out about where he was staying. And the news makes its way to this Canaanite woman. And she sets out on this remarkable quest to get help for her daughter.

As I was trying to wrap my mind around the perplexing way Jesus talked to her, I realized I was beginning to ignore her role in all of this. So I shifted my attention more to what she was doing, and that opened up the passage for me in a whole new way.

Because this story is all about someone who asked the Lord for answers, faced incredible hurdles to getting those answers and at the end of the day, she STILL walked away blessed. That to me is worth exploring. I want that kind of tenacity, that spirit that refuses to be discouraged by how things look.

I don't know about you, but I find that if I pray about something a few times and don't see results, I tend to give up. There are a few ongoing requests I stick with for years, but it's easy to assume that if nothing happens immediately, God must be saying no and closing a door.

This woman's situation says otherwise, and if we retrace her steps, we may find the encouragement we need for our own interactions with God.

We're not told much about her personal background, other than that she's a Canaanite. The Canaanites had an ancient history of being enemies with Israel. She's outside of God's chosen people – way outside.

But that doesn't slow her down. Mark tells us as soon as she heard where Jesus was, she set off to find him. For her, there was a physical act of **moving toward Christ**. She left the comfort of her own home and went searching for this man who worked miracles. It may be a simple, obvious point, but to me it is significant that she didn't just sit where she was and hope he would come to her – she repositioned herself to be within earshot of Jesus. She put herself closer to him

The April issue of *Christianity Today* has an article all about spiritual travel – visiting sites from the Bible and history that have spiritual significance. Mt. Sinai, places where Jesus walked and talked, as well as places where Martin Luther or Augustine or the Apostle Paul stood. Incidentally, our own Dean Owen has an article in this same issue. He did a great job on it. Be sure to check it out. But this other article concludes by pointing out that God dwells in us – there is no place on earth where we are closer to God's ear than anywhere else.

That means that for us to talk about moving toward Christ, we can't talk in physical terms – we have to think in spiritual terms. If we are hoping to have our prayers heard, we too will need to move toward Jesus.

What does that look like for me? How do I place myself close to Christ so he will listen to me? Sometimes it's what I need to move away FROM as much as what I'm moving TO. The Psalm writer says:

Psalm 66:18

*If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.*

As another translation puts it, “If I were cozy with evil, God would not have listened.” God will not bless sin. He just won't do it. We can't cry out to him for help and expect answers in our time of trouble if we're hanging on to an attitude or habit that is out of line with his will. The first step in moving toward Christ is confessing whatever it is and asking his forgiveness.

We could leave that to the end of the sermon, but I want to pause right here and give you a minute to talk to God and confess whatever might come to mind for you right now. If that is the first piece in moving toward him, that may also be a key for being able to hear and take in the next steps. So let's just pause for a moment and ask God's forgiveness and help to change.

There is a need to move away from where we've been, and there's a need to move toward Jesus. Next time you go to Los Angeles, you may decide you'd like to see where the movie stars live. There are two ways to do this. You can drive around randomly and hope you recognize a name on a mailbox. Or, you can go online ahead of time to any number of web sites that provide maps and addresses to exactly where various celebrities live.

This Canaanite woman had heard about Jesus, and that information became her destination. She didn't wander around aimlessly, looking for him – she had a street address and she went straight there.

We've all heard where we can find Christ. He's right on every page of Scripture. That's the address we've been given. We can hope to bump into him in other ways, through other experiences. But the best way to put ourselves in his neighborhood is to spend time with his word. Especially when we have something we're planning to ask of him. God's word helps us see what to ask and what we can expect.

Psalm 119:169-170

*Let my cry come right into your presence, GOD;
provide me with the insight that comes only from your Word.
Give my request your personal attention,
rescue me on the terms of your promise.*

We come to God with so much need, and we may not even know what we should pray. But Scripture helps us find our voice. Scripture is where we discover all kinds of people camped on God's doorstep, seeking his mercy.

That includes this woman. When she got close enough to be heard, she started letting her need be known:

Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.

At this point, I picture her outside the door of the house, yelling and hoping somebody will hear her. She's made it this far – now if only someone will respond. But what happens?

Jesus did not answer a word.

All her effort and her cries seem to be falling on deaf ears. This is where we start to feel uneasy. Where is the compassion and sensitivity we have seen in Jesus? How can he give this woman the silent treatment?

Dealing with silence is something every Christian experiences. We all go through periods where everything we are asking God seems to go unanswered. For some people it is devastating when God says nothing. Ted Turner, the billionaire, says that he lost his faith when he prayed for God to heal his sister and she still died. The silence of God in that situation was unbearable for him.

But other people see the silence differently. Peter Greig is an author whose wife was diagnosed with a brain tumor. He too prayed and prayed for healing, and it seemed God was unresponsive – so much so that he wrote a book about unanswered prayer. But he

saw the situation much differently than Ted Turner. He wrote a poem entitled “Engaging the Silence”:

First there is *prayer*
And where there is prayer
There may be *miracles*
But where miracles may not be
There are *questions*
And where there are questions
There may be *silence*
But silence may be more than *absence*
Silence may be presence *muted*
Silence may not be nothing
But something to explore, defy, accuse, *engage*
And this is prayer
And where there is prayer
There may yet be miracles...

In other words, maybe the silence is a space in which something more is still happening. Maybe it doesn't mean God isn't listening. Maybe it is part of a longer process.

We can feel all defensive for this woman that Jesus seemed to ignore her, but that silence didn't seem to deter her at all. She kept right on with her asking, over and over again.

Where is God silent for you right now? What has that silence done to your prayer life? Has it shut you down and made you give up? Silence is more than absence – it's something to explore, defy, accuse and engage. Silence is not the end of a conversation with God unless we choose to walk away.

This woman refused to do that, and soon the disciples were pleading her case as well. “Lord, do something about this woman. Make her go away. She's starting to get annoying.” Nice empathy, boys.

Jesus still sounds callous as he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Christ's ministry had a primary focus on the Jewish community, because that was the way God wanted to take salvation to the whole world. It would begin by establishing this new relationship with his people that would then open up to everyone who believed.

So Jesus was theologically on target when he said what he said, but it still rings a little on the harsh side. But what's curious is how the disciples reacted to that. Because instead of sending the woman away, they brought her inside! We can't recapture the tone in which Jesus delivered his line that day. Maybe he said it with a sense of irony: “I thought I was focusing on Israel here...” Maybe he was emphasizing that he was sent to lost sheep, and somehow he was including her in that. We don't really know. All we know is that once again, what seems like a shut down only brings the woman in closer.

Do you remember back in 2005 when Cindy Sheehan camped out in front of President Bush's Texas ranch, saying she was going to stay there until she got an audience with him? The longer he avoided her, the more she ramped up her speeches in the media, getting angrier and more demanding with every passing day.

That's the natural course of events – for emotions to escalate when you feel ignored. What's amazing about the woman in our story is that when she finally gets in front of Jesus, after all the delays and stalls along the way, she's not all fired up and hopping mad. She doesn't get huffy and demanding. Instead she bows down in worship and leaves the matter in front of Jesus. Her request has now been boiled down to simply, "Lord, help me!" Nothing else needs to be said. She seems to have been softened and humbled by the experience, rather than the other way around.

Choosing humility

It's easy to get bossy with God when he doesn't seem to be answering. We grow impatient with his speed and take on a more demanding tone. Why hasn't he done what we asked? He wants us to pray doesn't he? Our hurt turns to anger and more despair.

A better way is to humble ourselves before him. Our place is to bow in worship, not present a list of demands. A simple, "Lord, help me" is enough.

As she does that, she hears the first words that Christ speaks directly to her, and they are perhaps the most puzzling of all:

It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.

And just to be sure we heard him correctly, let's look at how Mark records it:

Mark 7:27

"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

Yeah, that sounds pretty much the same. Ouch. What a demeaning thing to say. Did Jesus really just call this woman a dog? How are we going to possibly talk our way around that one?

There's really not a way to sugar coat it. But there are two things that we need to know about what Jesus said before we get all offended. The first is to figure out what Jesus intended by his remark. Was he going for an insult that would drive this woman away? Did he want to shut her down?

I don't believe he did. Rabbis were known for using riddles and provocative statements to stimulate the thinking of their listeners. Teachers still use that technique today, playing devil's advocate almost to help students think through their arguments. And I think Jesus' intent was to engage this woman with a metaphor.

When Karin was in high school, she and her family took a trip to Africa. As she was trying to be friendly, she would wave at all the kids. Every time, they would all flock around her. At first she thought they were just curious about this white girl. But it turns out, the way she was waving meant more than “hello” in that culture. It meant “Come here I have something for you.” So all these children would leave empty-handed and disappointed because Karin had nothing to give them.

Christ is doing the complete opposite. From our cultural perspective, his words seem to be shooing this woman away, but she gets all her needs met and leaves satisfied.

If you get into the Greek, the word for dog he is using here is really the word for puppy. His description is of a meal setting, and he’s talking about feeding priorities. Essentially he’s saying, “You’re like a little puppy begging at the dinner table, and I hear you, but the kids have to eat first.” Now that’s a very different way to hear it than, “You’re a filthy, mangy dog, so beat it.”

The second thing we need to look at is how the woman reacted, which I believe confirms what we just said. Because she is not fazed in the least by that statement. There’s no hint of her feeling attacked or discouraged. In fact quite the opposite appears to be true -- she sees it as a chance to keep the dialogue going. Hey – at least he’s talking to her now. And – he gave a glimmer of hope, because what he said was that the children have to eat FIRST – not that the dogs NEVER get to eat. It meant he was at least somewhat open to negotiation. And she wedged her way right through that opening:

Matthew 15:27

She was quick: "You're right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master's table."

That was a beautiful comeback. It’s so beautiful that we might miss her opening line. She says “You’re right.” You’re right Lord. You have a point. Part of working our way through God’s answers to our prayers is found in **accepting the truth**. Christ was not wrong when he said there was an order to things. It may not have seemed fair, it may not have been what she wanted to hear, but she acknowledged that it was true and that he did not owe her a thing in that moment.

There is a premise that we have to keep in mind as we approach God, and that is that he is not beholden to us. Anything we get from him is mercy. We are not entitled to be first in line, we are not entitled to get the answer we want. As we hear God speak, we may need to accept some difficult truth and say, “You’re right, Lord. I was in the wrong. I am seeing myself more clearly now.”

This woman doesn’t stop there, though. She took Christ’s metaphor and expanded it. She pointed out that the dogs really didn’t need to wait – they technically did find plenty to eat in the crumbs that fell to the ground and the pieces of food the children didn’t eat.

It's absolutely brilliant. Despite setback after setback, this lady is **holding out for blessing**. Her refusal to give up is what Jesus recognized. And what did he say?

Woman, you have great faith!

You have great faith. She is the only person in Scripture ever given that compliment by Jesus. It's all the more significant because not too many pages previously, Jesus had told his own disciples they had incredibly SMALL faith.

And here's what I believe is the lesson to take away from her experience: Just because we think God has turned us down doesn't mean he wants us to accept that and move on. More than that, some of you have unanswered prayer in your past that has left you with distrust as a cornerstone for all your other prayers.

God invites us to continue praying through the roadblocks and potholes along the way. It reminds me of the story of Jacob from the Old Testament. He was travelling back to his homeland and he had sent his family on ahead of him. While he is by himself he has this unique encounter with God.

Genesis 32:24-30

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Jacob would not let go until he got the blessing. I give up way too quickly, and I think sometimes I do it as if I am accepting God's will. But sometimes God wants us to wrestle longer.

P.T. Forsyth uses the illustration of sickness to get this point across. We might say if we experience a disease or illness, that it is by God's will that it's in our lives. Maybe he has something to teach us through it. But we also believe it is something to be resisted. The whole medical profession is dedicated to fighting disease. We don't just resign ourselves to being sick as part of God's will – we see it as something that he has allowed in our lives, expecting us to resist it and strive to overcome it.

He then writes this:

Obedience is the chief end. But obedience is not mere submission, mere resignation... We obey God...as much when we try to change his will as when we bow to it.

God invites us to lock horns with him, to wrestle and not let go. It is his will to bless us. This woman's daughter was healed – after a two minute conversation! There is such a feast at his table that even the crumbs that fall from it, the mere leftover scraps are enough to satisfy us. We need the mentality that says, "I am not letting go until you bless me. Even a scrap from the table will do, but I am working this one through until I walk away with what you have for me." There is always a crumb.

What might that blessing look like for us. It could be peace. Where we have God's authority, we experience his peace. It could be the blessing of being able to fix your eyes on Jesus – the suffering Jesus. There is nothing you can experience that he doesn't understand.

God may give you the blessing of freedom – freedom from living as if your good behavior is what kept you in God's care. Maybe truth is the takeaway, recognizing that your hip was out of joint when really you should have been dead.

So many crumbs spill off the table – Rest. Joy. Strength. Courage. Wisdom.

When we move toward Christ, when we engage the silence and are humble enough to hear his truth, we can know this: our God satisfies the hungry with good things. And even the roughest road cannot spoil what waits for us. When we wrestle with God, we overcome, because he lets us win. To quote Forsyth again,

He loves that holy war. He may be too many for you, and lift you from your feet. But it will be to lift you from the earth, and set you in the heavenly places which are theirs who fight the good fight and lay hold of God as their eternal life.