

## "A God We Can Trust"

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Have you ever really wanted something from someone, but they said no... everyone in here, right? And when you were told no, what was your reaction? I worked at Lutheran Social Services earlier this summer with the 5- to 6-year-olds, and I saw a very similar reaction from each child every time I told them no when they wanted something. Usually, it started with them trying to persuade me to give them what they wanted. They would list all the good things they did that day or why they deserve it or how they believe they have somehow "earned it." And the more I continued to say no to what they were asking for, the more they would beg me about it until I just didn't respond at all. And, when I quit responding to them, they would typically get frustrated and give up. I'm not someone they could trust to give them what they wanted or thought they needed, so they would just walk away. And then, of course, they would move onto the next teacher to see if they would give them what they were asking for instead.

In our gospel reading for today, we hear about a Canaanite woman asking Jesus to heal her daughter. And Jesus' response is very unexpected. In fact, his initial response is silence. Complete silence, not even one word. And when he did finally answer after the woman continued begging, it was not exactly a response we would want to hear. It appears that he says no to her?! He didn't come for people like her?! This certainly does not sound like the Jesus we talk about with Sunday School children or preach about in church! Surely, he would not say no to this woman or turn her away.

But certainly, we can all relate to this in some way. We know that God does say no sometimes. We've all asked for things and prayed for things that just don't seem to happen or work out the way we hoped. We don't understand why something is happening to us or how we got where we are. We don't understand why God would let this happen or why He seems silent. And if we're being honest, it's frustrating. It makes us feel like no one's listening. God, can you even hear me?! Can't you see me? But despite our prayers and our hope, silence. It makes us wonder what the point is. Is God even hearing our prayers? Is he ignoring us? Is this really a God we can trust?

In times like this, is our faith that God knows what He is doing more like the strength and persistence of the Canaanite woman, or more like my children at Lutheran Social Services, trying to earn it and ultimately falling short and giving up in the end. Giving up and no longer trusting, or at least barely trusting, that Jesus can give us all we ever need? Then, we're really questioning, is this a God we can trust?

Why does God stay silent, and why would he ignore us? Why did he do this to the woman in our passage? Was he ignoring her until she proved she had a strong enough faith? This passage raises a couple very important questions for us that I need to answer before going any further in this sermon. How do I know I have a strong enough faith for God to listen? And how do we know we have a God we can trust with our whole heart, soul, and mind?

See, there are some parts of this passage that we need to be cautious about, so we need to start by answering this first question. Because this passage can easily make people feel like their FAITH wasn't good enough. It appears in this passage that Jesus answered the woman and gave her exactly what she wanted only when she proved she had an unbelievably strong faith. So, many people take it too far and start believing things like... "It's all my fault this has happened because my FAITH must not have been strong enough. If only I had faith like the Canaanite woman in the passage, then my family member would have been healed or I wouldn't have this sickness... God wouldn't be ignoring me and turning me away if I just proved I had a better kind of faith." Many Christians read this text as if Jesus will ignore us and turn us away and bad things will happen in life until we somehow prove we have a strong faith like the woman did. Some may tell you that "if you just believe enough in Jesus, then He will do whatever you want Him to do." And this idea is one part of a false teaching called the "prosperity gospel," and this a passage that may be used to try to support this... But this is just another form of us earning our own way, or the idea we can earn ourselves a good life with no hardship on earth.

So, we definitely need to understand what exactly was happening in this passage. Because first, Jesus was not ignoring the woman during her initial pleas. God does not ignore our prayers until we have just the right amount of faith and trust like the woman, and then he'll answer the way we want - God always hears our prayers even if His plan is greater and different from ours. He never turns us away. It's not about who has more faith and who trusts God more. After all, when Jesus was asked how much faith a person needs to be saved in Matthew 17 and Luke 17, he said that we just need "faith the size of a mustard seed."

So, why doesn't Jesus answer her request right away? The text tells us that the woman is a Canaanite, which means she was a Gentile. The main idea here is that she is not a Jew. There were Jews, and there were Gentiles. If you're not a Jew, you're a Gentile. So, she is the kind of person that the Pharisees and religious leaders of the time would have seen as unclean and despised and defiled since she is not a Jew. So, why did Jesus not answer her request to start? Because she was a Gentile, not a Jew. Nothing to do with her needing to prove her faith or her not having enough faith at first.

Now this appears to raise a whole new problem. This means that JESUS HIMSELF seems to be saying that he has come for Jews, not Gentiles like her. He seems to turn her away because she is somehow not worthy simply based on the fact, she was a Gentile... which kind of seems even worse when you think about it.

But... I'd like to remind everyone that most of us here are probably Gentiles, not Jews, and we're experiencing Jesus' ministry right now and we've been given faith. And Paul says in Romans that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek because everyone who believes will be saved. So, WHY did he not answer her, say he came for the Jews, and then use a metaphor comparing Jews to children and Gentiles to dogs?

Let's just completely break down the story quick, okay, and look at a parallel passage, Mark 7, that talks about this same story in Mark's words. Mark 7:27 says, "FIRST, let the children eat all they want." Children, again, meaning the Jews. Jesus is saying in our passage that his ministry is for the Jew FIRST. Not to the Jew ONLY, but to the Jew FIRST.

Now this makes much more sense. If we look back to the Old Testament, Israel, or the Jews, were God's chosen people. Deuteronomy 14:2 explains that God has chosen these people, the Jews, to be His treasured possession. BUT, in Genesis 18:18, it says that ALL the nations will be blessed through Abraham, a Jew. It starts with Abraham FIRST, AND all nations will be blessed. Genesis 22 says that all nations will be blessed, but it is in Abraham's seed, a Jew, that it will happen.

There are many more verses like this throughout the Bible that speak about God doing something for the Jewish people, and it results in a blessing for the entire world. To the Jew first in His plan, and then to the Gentile. And we could get into a long discussion of why that is and why it was the Jews first in His plan, but it's not really the point I'm trying to make for our reading today.

So, what Jesus is saying in our passage is that in this moment in history, his mission priority was the Jewish people. This is not to say that the Gentiles were not important, but Jesus was in the middle of fulfilling God's ultimate plan for salvation, and that plan started with the Jews. Paul in Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." This is also why in Matthew 10 Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." But then, after his death and resurrection, he gives a new command by telling his disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Jew first, and then everyone.

Because it was always God's plan to save all believers. Isaiah 49 even says that restoring only the Jews is not enough for God, so He will also make a light for the Gentiles. We can see in other passages that the tides were slowly starting to turn, and the ultimate salvation plan was being fulfilled as Jesus did more and more for the whole world, not just the Jews like early on in his ministry. He fed the 5000 in Jewish territory early on, and then fed the 4000 in Gentile territory later in the gospels.

Plus, just to really hit the nail on the head in understanding this passage, let's do a quick Greek lesson about the word "dogs" in the passage because it is not meant to be insulting. The Jews are being compared to children and the gentiles are being compared to dogs, but it shows us that both Jew and Gentile were certainly important to Jesus. There are two different words for dog in Greek. The Greek word shown on the screen is

used quite a lot in the Bible, and it basically means something that is gross, wild, or doesn't belong. For example, in Revelation, Jesus uses this word to refer to false teachers preaching false things.

But Jesus does not use this word in our gospel reading today. HE DOES NOT USE THIS WORD. The Greek word used in our passage today that also translates to dogs is shown on the screen, and it is only used in two spots in the Bible. Here and in that parallel passage in Mark 7 describing the same event. That's it. So, Matthew and Mark made sure to use this Greek word instead that is closer to puppy, pet, or companion. So not a child, but something you still care for and love. Obviously if you had to choose between feeding your children or your pet, you're going to feed your child FIRST, right? At least I hope that's the case! But that doesn't mean you aren't going to feed your pet or your friend at all! So, Jesus is using this metaphor to simply reiterate his plan we just talked about, saying that he is going to fulfill his mission by going to the Jew FIRST, but everyone is saved.

So, now we can say we understand the passage, and we can see that Jesus was not ignoring her prayers, and he was listening even if it wasn't going to turn out how SHE hoped. He had an ultimate plan that was beyond her comprehension, going to the Jew first and then the Gentile to save everyone in the end. He was not turning her away. His silence during her initial pleas had nothing to do with needing to prove her faith or earn his approval somehow. And now we can also see that he was not saying the woman was unclean or defiled like the Pharisees would have said just because she was a Gentile. He wasn't saying she didn't belong like his own disciples would have said.

No, in this passage, Jesus was showing us that as we stick with him even in hard times and trust his ultimate plan, he will fulfill his promises of salvation for us. It wasn't about needing to prove her faith so Jesus would answer how she wanted. It was about how she kept her faith despite the answer she didn't want. Even if we have faith like the Canaanite woman, hate to say it, bad things are still going to happen in life that may make us feel like God can't hear us. Bad things that happen in this life have nothing to do with our amount of faith. But, keeping our trust and faith in God and remembering that He ultimately knows what's for the best will bring us salvation in the end of this life just like it brought healing to the woman's daughter. Keeping her persistent faith even in the silence and hard times is what saved her daughter just like how faith alone is what brings us eternal life.

The Canaanite woman in this story for today could have easily given up on Jesus as he stayed silent. Or, she could have tried to persuade Jesus by telling him all the great things she has done and by explaining what a great person she was. She could have felt like she deserved it in some way. She could have tried to earn it somehow. But she didn't. She had faith in Jesus, not herself. Romans 3:10 reminds us that not one of us is righteous; not even one. As we said in the beginning of the service and as it says in 1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

The woman knew she was a sinner, and she didn't even have anything to offer. I mean, she was asking for crumbs under the table in our passage. As Martin Luther once said, we are beggars before God, and we can offer nothing to God except our sin and brokenness, but God is our gracious Father who provides for all our needs. All she could do is have faith in God and rely on HIS goodness, not her own. She continues to trust Jesus even despite the silence and hard times... it's not about God making all the bad things in life disappear because of how strong our faith is. After all, Paul in Romans 5 talks about how we will suffer despite our faith. But we know that God will take away all our pain and hardship and suffering at the end of this life as we stay persistent in trusting his plan and purpose.

Because just like the woman's daughter today, we ARE saved by our faith as we continue trusting in Jesus even amid hardships. It may not seem like it in this lifetime, and no matter how much we trust God, bad situations come. But God's plan isn't finished yet! We know we have something greater for us that God has planned even from the very beginning, and this life is temporary. What God has planned for us has already started in Jesus Christ, but it's just not fully here yet because we still have His promise of salvation waiting for us when Jesus comes back. 1 John 3:2 says "Dear friends, NOW we are children of God, and what we will be, has NOT YET been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

But, why should we even trust all this, and why trust God? This brings us to that second question. I was teaching my group of 4th grade through 7th grade at Vacation Bible School this year, and when we were going through our final story for the day, I had a couple boys ask me "How do you know you can trust all this?"

Because there are so many things we can't understand. If our amount of faith has nothing to do with bad things happening, then why on earth would a good God allow bad things to happen for some and not others? The woman may have stuck with Jesus and trusted Him even when he wasn't answering the way she hoped, but why should we? There can't possibly be any good coming from some things or any good explanation.

And despite stories of salvation or stories that describe bad situations turning out good due to God's perfect plan, it's so easy for us to start questioning God and putting HIM on trial when we are the ones who deserve to be on trial. Like the woman in our gospel reading, we are sinful beggars before God. But, the perspective of our world is, "If God was real, he wouldn't allow this to happen." Or "If God was actually good or all powerful, then He would remove all this suffering and sin and pain in the world." "Why God?" "He must not be a good God." Putting God on trial when we deserve to be on trial. When we deserve punishment. And we have heard that the cross is God's answer for our sin and punishment. BUT it is also His answer for all our questions when we don't understand.

We will never understand everything God has planned. We're limited in our capabilities. We will never understand why he answers some prayers in the ways we want but seems to be silent in response to others. We will never fully understand and SEE God's reasons behind everything in life. At least, we won't know in this life.

But the cross is how we KNOW we can trust God and have faith like the Canaanite woman. Because not only does the cross show us how much God loves us that he would take on the punishment we rightfully deserve, but it also shows us God's character. Humble to completely strip and empty Himself. Powerful to defeat sin and the devil. Wise to have a plan from the very beginning to save His children. Just to punish sin as he said he would, keeping His words true so that I know I can trust him and his word. But, loving to take on that punishment Himself so we didn't have to face it. He gave up everything so we could have everything. Humble, powerful, wise, just, fair, honest, and loving. I mean, that describes a person I know I can trust. So, that is a God I know I can trust.

Jesus' response to the woman in our reading today may seem out of His character... at first glance. God's response to our suffering and pain may seem out of His character... at first glance. I may not completely understand why something is happening or why we are here or why things are the way they are or why God planned my life this way. But I can see in that cross an ultimate plan that I know I can trust despite my questions and doubts because it was worth dying for. I can trust whatever his plan is because He proved he would die for that plan, for us. And Jesus on the cross shows me that God is a God who knows my heartbreak and my suffering and my pain and weaknesses. He understands me and my hurt. And that is a God I know I can trust.

In Matthew 6:10, we hear the famous words, "thy kingdom come, thy WILL be done." We know that God has a plan, and that He can work all things for good according to His wonderful will just like when Jesus was killed on the cross. Proverbs 3: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." This doesn't mean that hard times are not going to come. But we know that the Lord is good, and he is the same God in good times and in bad. He is the same God even when there seems to be silence, and having faith means that we trust he knows what's for the best. And we've seen situations we could never understand turn to beauty and salvation. A God we can trust.

Things are not perfect now, but we have that assurance of life with Christ through our faith and trust in God as we stick with him through the good and bad. An assurance of what's to come. One of the most quoted verses of the Bible is Jeremiah 29:11 - "for I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future and a hope" ... and of course this is true, but remember that when God

promised this to His original audience, these plans came after 70 long years! So, we may not understand now, but God is always working things for good. God is merciful and loving to sinful, weak, broken beggars like us as we trust he will provide all we need even in the hard times. And it's not about what you've done, good or bad, but what's been done for you. Not about having just a little more faith, but about sticking with the one who's with us even in hard times. He is a God who saves. A God who loves. A God who understands us. A God who restores and redeems. A God we can trust. Amen.