

# ***“Mega-Faith”***

**MATTHEW 15:21-28**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1206)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
March 24, 2013**



Several months ago, one of our members asked for a lesson on ways that we can increase our faith. As Christians, we understand that faith is extremely important. The Bible, in fact, has a lot to say about faith. In the Bible, for example, we read about strong faith, weak faith, rich faith, bold faith, abiding faith, steadfast faith, precious faith, and common faith. This morning, though, instead of just looking at faith as a subject, I would like for us to consider the example of a woman who is one of only two people in the New Testament who is described as having ***“great faith.”*** I find it interesting that when we look at the term in the original language, the Lord literally describes this woman’s faith as being ***“mega.”*** So, as we try to increase our own faith this morning, I would like for us to look at a woman who is described as having ***“mega-faith.”*** The passage is found in Matthew 15:21-28 (p. 1528). For those of you who are interested, there is a parallel account in Mark 7 (p. 1571), and we will be considering some information from Mark’s account, but most of our information this morning will be coming from Matthew 15.

As we look at what happens, most of us will probably be rather surprised (and maybe even a little bit disturbed) at how the Lord treats this woman. She comes to Jesus for help with a serious problem, and at first, the Lord just flat-out ignores the woman! Not only that, but toward the end of the passage, the Lord very clearly refers to this woman as a ***“dog.”*** Certainly, this does not fit with everything we know about the Lord. We think about the Lord as being the Good Shepherd, we think about the Lord as being a patient teacher, we think about the Lord as being a gentle healer. But in this passage he almost comes across as being a little bit harsh or even rude. In some ways, this is not the Lord that we know. And yet we find that the Lord ends with an amazing compliment concerning this woman’s faith.

For just a little bit of background (looking back to Matthew 14), Jesus has just fed the 5,000 men, he tells his disciples to get on a boat and to meet him on the other side while he goes off alone to pray, but as the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee, a storm comes up and he ends up walking on the water. When they come ashore at the end of Matthew 14, they are once again constantly surrounded by people who are always asking the Lord to do something, he then gets into a heated discussion with the Pharisees, and we now come to what appears to be a second attempt to get away for just a little bit. He just needs a little peace and quiet, and so for the first and only time in his 3-½ year ministry, Jesus leaves the Jewish territory. Sometimes today, we might refer to going “up north” to get away for a little bit. That is what the Lord does here. He goes “up north” to try to get a little peace a quiet. All of this brings us to Matthew 15:21-28,

*<sup>21</sup> Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." <sup>23</sup> But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." <sup>24</sup> But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." <sup>25</sup> But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" <sup>26</sup> And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." <sup>27</sup> But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master's table." <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once.*

This morning, as we study some ways to try to increase our faith, I would like to look very carefully at this particular woman as an example. What do we learn about her faith that we can apply to our faith? I would make five suggestions.

I. **First of all, we find in this passage that this woman's faith was INFORMED.**

The idea here is that her faith was based on some kind of knowledge. There was something behind it. This was not just a blind leap into the dark. For some reason, this pagan woman was under the impression that Jesus was able to remove a demon from her daughter. Now, in the area of Tyre and Sidon, the people normally worshiped idols. And yet somehow, this woman knew to come to Jesus. In fact, she kept on crying out (in verse 22), ***"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed."*** Somehow, then, this woman had heard that Jesus had power to help with her particular problem. Somehow, this woman knew that Jesus was the ***"Son of David"*** (she knew something about what that meant). In some way, this woman's faith had been informed. As I said earlier, this is the first time in his 3-½ year ministry that Jesus ever left the Jewish territory. He had never been to Tyre and Sidon. How, then, did this woman learn about Jesus?

If we were to turn over to Mark's account (Mark 7:25), we would find a new and interesting little detail. Mark tells us, ***"But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately came and fell at His feet."*** Very interesting! This woman didn't just wake up thinking of Jesus in some miraculous way, but instead, she came to Jesus ***"after hearing of Him."*** Her faith had been informed. Somebody had told her about the Lord. To give us a better idea of where Jesus is, I want to put a map up here (with my apologies to the dog on the wall) – you can see Tyre and Sidon up on the Mediterranean seacoast, you can see Jerusalem down near the bottom, and you can see the area of Galilee where Jesus spent a lot of his time. Since the Lord had never been in that area up near Tyre and Sidon, we might wonder, "How did this woman know about Jesus?" Who told her about the Lord? And even more importantly, how did she know that the Lord had the power to heal? In Luke's account of what is basically the Sermon on the Mount (a sermon delivered somewhere near the Sea of Galilee), we have an interesting reference to the fact that a large crowd was gathered, a crowd of many people, ***"...from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all"*** (Luke 6:17-19). So how do you think this woman way over in the region of Tyre and Sidon heard about the Lord? How did she know that Jesus had the power to cast out demons? It seems safe to me to say that people were talking about it! Not too long before this encounter, in a different location many miles away, Jesus had healed a bunch of people who had come down to visit from Tyre and Sidon. Those people went back home, and word spread very quickly. Her faith, then, was not just a blind leap into the dark, her belief in Jesus is not something that she just made up, but her faith was informed. Her faith was based on

some kind of testimony from those who had seen the Lord do this kind of thing before. Here she is just torn up over what was happening to her daughter, and a friend or neighbor most likely says, “Hey, I know somebody who can help you with that!” We think of what Paul would go on to say in Romans 10:17 where he explained that, “**...faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.**” At some point, somebody had the courage to step up and say something to this woman. The beginning of faith is being informed.

And I see at least two lessons here. First of all, as Christians, we are the only ones with the power to speak up. Nobody else can do this for us. We have friends and neighbors and coworkers who are being destroyed by sin. If we don’t say something, nobody will. You won’t talk to my neighbors, and I probably won’t be talking to your neighbors. So first of all, we have a responsibility. But there is also a second lesson here, and that is: If our faith is weak, if our faith is not as strong as it could be, then we have a responsibility to get more information. If faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (as Paul says that it does), then we have a responsibility to get ourselves and our families into the word of Christ. We have a responsibility to read and learn. So, with regard to the request concerning ways to increase our faith, we learn from this woman that her faith was informed. Somebody told this woman about the Lord. In the same way, 1.) We need to learn, and 2.) We need to tell.

**II. There is a second lesson we can learn from this woman’s mega-faith, and that is: In the process of coming to faith in Jesus, this woman had to be BOLD – this woman had to struggle to climb over some significant barriers.**

We find that this woman had many things going against her. We have already alluded to this at least a little bit, but she was a foreigner. And not only was she not a Jew, but she was a Gentile, and (according to Mark’s account) a woman of the Syrophoenician race. Matthew tells us that she was a Canaanite. These were people who were hated by the Jews. Not only that, but she lived in the area of Tyre and Sidon. These were seaport cities known for their immorality. I hate to stereotype, but think about the reputation of a city like Las Vegas. If these two cities had had a marketing department, their slogan might have been, “What happens in Tyre and Sidon stays in Tyre and Sidon.” These cities had a reputation. And then, on top of this, think about this from her point of view: To go to Jesus in her hometown, she would be making a statement that she was breaking with her lifelong religious tradition. By going to Jesus, she was publicly admitting that her pagan idolatry was powerless in this situation. That right there is a significant barrier, to leave the faith of your family. And then on top of all this, she was a woman! And normally, Jewish men did not do much talking with women. So, right from the beginning, this woman had some serious barriers to overcome.

There is something I have failed to mention up to this point, and that is: When we look at Mark’s account, it is clear that the Lord is basically hiding. Remember how I said that the Lord was trying to get away? Mark tells us that Jesus went up to the region of Tyre, “**And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice**” (Mark 7:24). So the Lord is basically on vacation, he just wants a little peace and quiet, so he sneaks away to a house where he hopes that nobody can find him. So that is another barrier. She had to find a Savior who was basically hiding from her!

And all of this is before she even opens her mouth! Once she gets up the courage to cross those social and gender barriers, and once she actually finds the Lord in hiding, she speaks. And when she speaks, we see that the Lord just flat out ignores her. Can you imagine being in that situation? Mark’s account tells us that they are all in a house at this point. So this woman comes into the house (a house that is not hers) and asks for the Lord’s help, and the Lord says nothing! Matthew says that Jesus “**...did not answer her a word.**” Can you imagine that? Can we picture this woman overwhelmed with concern for her daughter and the Son of God just

sitting there or standing there not saying a word? That must have been a tense and awkward moment. So, in that tension, it is almost as if the disciples are caught off guard, almost a little exasperated, and so they implored the Lord (in verse 23) saying, ***“Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.”*** And that is where we find this woman continuing to climb over barriers. Instead of turning away, this woman continues to shout.

Think about this as we back away from this situation for just a moment: When it comes to learning something from this woman’s faith, once she had the information, once she knew that Jesus had the power to heal her daughter, this woman refused to take “No” for an answer! Once she made an informed decision to take her concern to the Lord, there was nothing that could stand in her way! That right there is a lesson for us. Once we make a decision to go after the Lord, let us not turn back – not for anything – and let us learn from this woman’s example. She was bold. She was tenacious. I might say “tenacious like a dog,” but we will get to that in just a moment. For now, she is bold and allows no barrier to stand in her way. So, applying this to us, we are to 1.) Be informed, and we are to 2.) Be bold – we are to take the truth that we know and hold on no matter what, letting nothing stand in our way.

**III. When it comes to this woman’s faith, there is a third idea here, and that is: Even before getting what she wanted, this woman expressed her faith in WORSHIP – she came to the Lord in all humility.**

Even when faced with these obstacles, notice what happens in verse 25, ***“But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’”*** Instead of reasoning, instead of explaining the situation again, instead of describing how much her daughter is suffering, instead of these things, we find in Mark’s account that the woman throws herself down at Jesus’ feet and she just outright begs for the Lord’s help. Matthew tells us that she ***“bows down before Him.”*** This goes back to a word that is sometimes translated as ***“worship.”*** It carries the idea of bowing low and kissing the king’s hand or the king’s ring. That is the word that is used here. She came to him in humility.

I know we will get to the dog in just a moment, but when I think of worship and getting my own hand kissed, I think of the dogs that we have had in the past. What happens when you pet a dog and then stop for a split second? Our dog would always nuzzle its head under my hand. She would not allow you to forget about her. I have had the pleasure of meeting some of your dogs, and this seems to be almost universal. Dogs have no shame, they have no sense of pride, and they will do whatever they need to do to get attention. We might say that dogs have a way of worshipping their owners. Dogs will kiss your hand to get your attention. Cats, of course, demand to BE worshiped (we don’t have time to get into that this morning), but the point here is that even in a time of great pain in her life, this woman found it in her heart to worship the Lord Jesus. She came to him in humility.

The application to us today is hopefully very clear: Great faith allows us to worship God even in the difficult times. We think of Job who lost everything. Right there in the middle of it, even with a very limited understanding of what was really going on, the Bible tells us that Job ***“fell to the ground and worshiped”*** (Job 1:20), ***“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord”*** (verse 21). Great faith and humility go hand-in-hand – even in very difficult circumstances.

IV. **There is another lesson on faith from this woman, and it comes from the fact that her faith was PERSISTENT – in fact, we might even say that her faith was RELENTLESS.**

And this is where we get to the Lord's statements in verses 24 and 26, ***"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"*** and ***"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."*** With that statement (unless I have missed something), the Lord pretty much refers to this woman as a ***"dog."*** Personally, I really wish we could see the Lord's face here. I wish that we could hear the tone of his voice. Obviously, it doesn't look too good in print, but I would not be surprised if you could see a little twinkle in his eye. I would not be surprised to hear just a little bit of a smile here. Maybe, maybe not. Hopefully someday we can ask him if he could kind of reenact the episode with the Syrophenician woman. I would love to see and hear this. But he does very clearly refer to this woman as a dog. I should point out though, that the Lord uses a word that indicates a ***"little dog."*** Sometimes we think of dogs in the ancient world, and we think of these tough-looking strays, the scavengers that would roam the streets at night. The Lord, though, uses the word for ***"little dog."*** Today, we might refer to a puppy or maybe a small dog that we might have around the house.

If we go back to Mark's account, we have another little ray of hope in this statement as the Lord was saying to her, ***"Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."*** That is different than what we read in Matthew's account; however, it is not necessarily a contradiction, because it appears that Jesus had to say this a number of times. Again, Mark says that the Lord ***"was saying to her."*** In other words, in this woman's relentless pursuit, the Lord had to repeat himself. Have you ever had to repeat yourself in an argument? The Lord did, and so we have two versions of what he said here. And in at least one of those, the Lord said that the children in the family should be ***"satisfied first"*** and that their bread should not be thrown to the dogs. Well, that cracked the door open just a little bit. If there is a ***"first,"*** then there has to be a ***"second."*** That right there allowed this woman to put her foot in the door! And so she jumps on it, ***"Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."*** She was saying to Jesus, "I am not asking for the main course. I am not asking for the full meal. All I need today is just a scrap. All I need is a crumb from under the table" (paraphrased). Even a small scrap is all this woman needed for her daughter to be healed. All she needed was just a crumb of the Lord's time.

So, when the Lord referred to her as a dog, this woman jumped right in, and she ran with it, ***"Yes, Lord, I am a dog!"*** Back when we had a dog, we would joke that we never needed to clean the kitchen floor – not because the dog licked the floor, but because nothing would ever hit the floor! Dogs seem to have a sense that a piece of food might be falling, and they always seem to be right there underneath it. And that is what this woman is willing to do – all she wants is just a small scrap. ***"Don't take food from the kids, but just let me sit right there under the chair!"***

Of course, looking back at what happened during the Lord's ministry (if we could continue this illustration), it is obvious that the children in the picture actually threw their food on the floor. The Jewish people (for the most part) rejected the gospel message. As we find later in the New Testament, the apostle Paul went to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles (we read about this in Romans 1:16), ***"To the Jew first and also to the Greek."*** Paul would usually start preaching in a synagogue, he would be driven out, and then he would spend most of his time preaching to the Gentiles. In that sense, this Syrophenician woman is almost a little taste of what is about to happen. Her eagerness to take the scraps is a little foreshadowing of the time when the full meal would be offered not just to the Jews, but to the whole world as well.

So we learn a lesson on persistence. When it comes to faith, here is a woman who stuck with it even when ignored and insulted to some degree. Over the years, most of us have seen people leave the Christian faith

because somebody hurt their feelings. It seems that others just love drama, “Woe is me! Nobody likes me!” This morning, though, we have studied a woman of great faith who had every reason to throw a fit and move on, but she was persistent and stuck with it. She was relentless in her pursuit of the truth.

V. **There is one more lesson we need to consider with regard to this woman’s faith, and that is: Her “great faith” was REWARDED.**

In Mark’s account, the Lord says, *“Because of this answer go; the demon has gone out of your daughter.”* In Matthew’s account, the Lord says, *“O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish,”* and her daughter was healed at once. I don’t know whether you have thought about this yet or not, but as far as I can tell, this is the first time that Jesus ever lost an argument! Time after time, the religious leaders would argue back and forth with the Lord, and the Lord always came out on top. But again, as far as I can tell, this is the first time that Jesus ever lost an argument. Of course, it is an argument that the Lord probably did not mind losing. In fact, we might say that the Lord allowed himself to be outwitted by this particular woman. And in the end, he gives this great compliment, and the woman’s daughter is healed. The woman, by the way, does not demand any kind of proof, but she simply leaves and goes back home. So we have a reminder here at the end that great faith (or mega-faith) will be rewarded, and that is certainly an encouragement for us to have the same kind of faith that she had.

**Conclusion:**

As we close, I would like for us to imagine being a Gentile in the First Century and reading this account out of Matthew and also out of Mark for the very first time. Matthew was written primarily to the Jews at some point before 70 AD. Mark was written primarily to a Roman audience and was probably the first gospel account to be written, probably at some point around 55 AD. But both books were circulated rather quickly. As far as I know, all of us here this morning are Gentiles. Think about living as a Gentile midway through the First Century, and imagine reading these two accounts. Someone stands up to read these books in the assembly, and we read about the Jews – Jews this, and Jews that – it seems like Jesus was always dealing with the Jews. But then we get to the Syrophenician woman. She is one of us! We have something in common with her! And that means that there is hope for us.

Did you know that Tyre and Sidon are mentioned elsewhere by the Lord? The Lord used these two Las Vegas-type cities as a rebuke to several Jewish cities. The Lord says in Luke 10, *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you”* (13-14). The main idea is that through faith, even those of us as Gentiles have a path to salvation. We might be the dogs under the table, but we are at the table. Through faith, there is hope for us.

Around this same time (in the mid-60’s AD), the apostle Paul wrote to a Gentile congregation on the island of Crete. As Gentiles, how bad can it get and what do we need to do? This is what Paul had to say in Titus 3:1-7,

*<sup>1</sup> Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, <sup>2</sup> to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. <sup>3</sup> For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. <sup>4</sup> But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, <sup>5</sup> He saved us, not*

***on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.***

Have we ever made any foolish decisions? Have we ever disobeyed God? Have we ever been deceived? Have we ever been enslaved to various lusts and pleasures? Have we ever spent time in malice and envy? Have we ever been guilty of hating another person? Where do we go from here? Are we too bad to be saved? Paul says that the kindness of God appeared to us and saved us – not because we are such good people, but instead, we are saved on the basis of his mercy, by the washing that takes place in baptism.

I am so thankful for the request that was made for a lesson on ways to increase our faith. I hope we have learned something from this woman who was the only person to ever win an argument with the Lord. If you have any questions about God's plan, we would be glad to meet with you – just let us know. If you would appreciate the prayers of this congregation or if you are ready to humbly obey the good news, if you are ready to repent and be baptized as the Lord has commanded, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)