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A Strange Story from the Life of Jesus

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To the casual reader the story of his encounter with a Canaanite woman may seem strangely uncharacteristic of what we know about Jesus (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). A “certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell at his feet . . . and she besought him that he would cast forth the devil out of her daughter.” This woman was not Jewish, but a Greek (Gentile). She fell at his feet “and cried unto him, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.’”

At first Jesus did not respond, but as his disciples were urging that he “send her away; for she crieth after us,” he explained that his ministry was to his own people. “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Still, the woman persisted. She would not abandon her purpose.

It was at this point that our Lord speaks to her in a way that seems harsh and abusive. “It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.” In any language to imply that a person is a “dog” sounds insulting. It was common among Jews of that age to despise people of other nations. The bluntness of His words no doubt pleased the disciples because they had been wanting to be rid of her. But it seems very unlike Jesus, who was so full of compassion and pity, whose character was the essence of love, that he would so denigrate one of God’s pitiable creatures, especially one whose only purpose was to save her daughter.

The explanation is in His divine anticipation of how she would respond. He foresaw that she would answer in a way that, on the one hand, ought to have shamed the twelve for their racial bigotry and lack of compassion, and which, on the other hand, would give her the opportunity to express the unwavering and humble faith that had brought her to Jesus. She said, “‘Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered and said unto her, ‘O woman, great is thy faith’” Her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

By inviting her response and by then granting her petition, He was preparing the disciples learn the truth that “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). Her case serves well as a rebuke for all forms of racial and national bigotry. More especially, however, her importunity in the face of what seemed a hopeless rebuff teaches us the **humility that must accompany our faith**.

Though we know that “pride goeth before destruction” (Prov. 16:18), we tend to be very protective of our pride. A proud heart would not bare the implication in what seemed so unkind a rejection of her petition. But this woman had a need that was greater than her pride.

It might have seemed embarrassing to have to go to a stranger for help, but her desperation was greater than any sense of social propriety! It could be humiliating to ask for help from a foreigner, especially one from a nation that despised her people, but her daughter was suffering! How uncomfortable, even embarrassing, she might have felt knowing that the Lord’s disciples did not want her to be there, but she had a little girl at home that she loved more than she loved her own self-respect! In any circumstances, but especially in these, it might seem too degrading, too demeaning, too disgraceful, to have to get down on one’s knees and beg, but her daughter was “grievously vexed with a devil!” She was even ready to be a little dog if it meant she could have a few crumbs from off her Master’s table!

Suppose, however, that her pride had been stronger than her faith. What if she had said, “I don’t need this! I am not going to submit to such!” She would have gone home to find her little girl with the same affliction. Pride may be the greatest barrier between us and the blessings of the Lord. “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. . . . Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (Jas 4:6, 10). Jesus’ actions taught the disciples a lesson. What are your actions—regarding pride—teaching your children and grandchildren? Don’t abandon your ultimate purpose!