

Meaning of Mercy (Doggedness)

Proverbs 2:1-11

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding—indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds success in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.

Proverbs 16:18-25

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud. Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD. The wise in heart are called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction. Prudence is a fountain of life to the prudent, but folly brings punishment to fools. The hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent, and their lips promote instruction. Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” ²³ 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.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” ²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. ²⁶ He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” ²⁷ “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

MESSAGE:

There’s an old story about a country parson who had been invited to dinner one Sunday evening by a family in his congregation. After supper, everybody settled down in the living room with coffee and cake. As the conversation turned to the Scriptures, the father of the family said to his seven year old son, “Andrew, go and fetch the book we love so well.” The boy turned to his mother and said, “Mom, where’s the Sears Roebuck Catalogue?” Boy, does that show my age!

It's sad but true that in many families, the Bible gets very little use. Part of the reason for this is that a lot of Christians think it's a very difficult book to understand. Today's Gospel lesson is a case in point: it's a Scripture that has puzzled readers—including Biblical scholars—for a long time. The difficulty lies in the fact that although we like to think of Jesus as tender and loving, in these verses he comes across as uncaring and harsh. True, he finally gives the woman what she wants, but only after refusing her twice and then calling her a dog—which in the vernacular of the day was about as degrading a term as you could call someone. What's going on here? Was the Son of Man having a bad day?

Some Biblical scholars have come up with inventive ways of trying to explain away Jesus' harshness. One scholar suggested that Jesus may have had a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face when he spoke the offensive words—in other words, that he was joshing with the woman and didn't mean to be taken seriously. That scholar should be given an "A" for creativity and an "F" for scholarship: there's not a shred of evidence in the New Testament that Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, ever "joshed" with anyone, least of all when it came to demonic possession. Another scholar, Harley Swiggum of the ELCA, suggested that maybe Jesus was "playing to the gallery": i.e., giving the woman a hard time in order to provide an example to his disciples of how you should *not* treat someone when they come to you in need. As if to say, "*Is this what you guys want? To be cruel and uncaring to gentiles?*" But to suggest that Jesus would insult a person in desperate need who came begging to him for help in order to make a point with his disciples is highly unlikely; it doesn't fit in with everything we know about Jesus' character.

The reason these explanations have been tendered is because we just don't want to think that Jesus would speak to anyone this way, least of all to a poor woman who had come to him for help. But that doesn't give us license to bend the words of Scripture and try to make them mean something other than what they plainly say. When we start doing that, we're trusting our own sensibilities more than we do God's Word, and that's a slippery slope. We're better advised to wrestle with the difficult passages of Scripture and see what God can teach us through the process. So let's take the story line by line and see what we can make of it.

15:21-22: ²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

While it may not be obvious, this is an amazing statement coming from a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites had been enemies of the Israelites ever since the Israelites had invaded Canaan and taken their land away from them. They didn't worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, they worshipped the pagan gods—Baal and Ashtoreth. A Canaanite would not normally know anything about the God of the Jews—let alone the Messiah; yet this Canaanite woman not only calls Jesus "Lord," she also calls him "Son of David"—a Messianic term which would only be meaningful to an Israelite, because it was only to the Israelites that God had promised a Messiah who would be a "son of David." For that matter, most of the Jews didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah. *But the Canaanite woman did; somehow she knew.*

15:23-24: ²³ 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.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

After Jesus refuses to respond to the woman and is urged by his disciples to “send her away,” he dismisses her request, saying “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*” This is the only time in the Gospels where Jesus turned down a request for help. Moreover, it’s difficult to understand why He would do so based upon the fact that he had only been sent to the Jews, because he had already exorcised a demon from the Gederene demoniac, who was a non-Jew, and brought back to life a Roman centurion’s daughter—another gentile. But Jesus rejects this woman’s pleas specifically because she is a gentile. But that doesn’t stop her.

15:25: ²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

There is no other human attachment as strong as a mother’s attachment to her child. I remember a Fourth of July picnic in our community several years ago when a family pulled up in their car—a mother and father and their little boy. There was a softball game going on a little way off and just as the family was getting out of the car someone hit a towering drive which came down on the little boy’s shoulder. He started screaming with fright and pain and she hugged him and tried to comfort him. As she did so, I could see her face, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen a look on another human face as full of rage as that mother’s. Her lips were pulled back, her eyeteeth were showing: she looked absolutely feral. I’m sure she knew it was an accident, but the fact remained that *someone had injured her child and you don’t mess with one of Mama’s kids.*

So the dogged perseverance of the Canaanite mother is not surprising: her love for her child trumped everything else. She simply says: Lord, help me.” But then Jesus drops a bomb on her:

15:26: ²⁶ He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

Unthinkable! You and I wouldn’t dream of saying such a thing, yet Jesus says it. And please understand that a “dog” in those days was regarded as the lowest of the low as far as animals were concerned. Yet Jesus calls the woman and her countrymen “dogs” and refuses once again to help her in her hour of greatest need! And this is “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”??? What can we make of it? In the first place let’s simply admit that Jesus does speak harshly to the woman. We can speculate endlessly about his motives, but we cannot get around the fact that he insults her. But let’s not spend too much time on OUR response to His words, and focus instead on HER response.

Does she object to what Jesus said to her? Does she point out to him that since He is the Lord he has enough healing power to go around—enough for Jews and gentiles alike? Does she remind him of other healings he has performed for gentiles? No, no and no. She doesn’t take offense, she doesn’t argue: she simply agrees with Jesus, saying, ²⁷ “*Yes, it is Lord...but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.*”

Now this response is remarkable. First of all, the woman doesn’t let pride get in her way: she will do anything to get help for her child, she knows Jesus can provide it, and she is

determined to get it. Second, for the third time, she addresses Jesus as “Lord.” This woman not only knows that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David; she also knows that he is Lord of the universe and can do anything He wants. Third, she doesn’t try to play on his emotions or arouse his compassion. She doesn’t say, “*Look at me Jesus! I’m a MOTHER with a SICK CHILD! Do something!*”

What DOES she do? ***She simply takes Jesus at His word!*** She doesn’t argue or remonstrate or plead with him. She simply says, ²⁷ “*Yes it is, Lord...Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.*” In other words, “I’ll take a crumb because a crumb is all that my daughter needs!” *She just takes Jesus at His word.*

And that is exactly what Jesus wants us to do: take Him at His Word! And the woman’s child is healed.

15:28 ²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

I wonder what you and I would have done? I fear we might have handled the situation differently. I can imagine getting angry and walking away in a huff with our child still tormented by a demon, saying “Nobody talks to me that way!” Pride always goes before the fall. But not this woman: this woman had great faith ***and she had great need.***

It’s hard for self-sufficient people to feel great need, and therefore it’s hard for them to have great faith. That’s why Jesus told his disciples that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. But this woman had no resources of her own; the problem she had was way beyond her power to deal with.

She had great need and great faith—which are the best two things any of us CAN have. First of all, she believed that Jesus was the Lord, who had come to save us and who had all the power in the universe. Second, she believed that in spite of everything Jesus said, He would heal her daughter. And she was right on both counts.

Jesus wants all people to be saved and healed and there are only two things that keep him from healing and saving us: we either doubt that He can or doubt that He will. And we end up trusting in ourselves rather than Jesus. “If you want to get it done right do it yourself.” ***But however much we would like to think so, we are not self-sufficient—don’t we know that by now?*** We’re not efficient machines that run smoothly most of the time and just need a tune-up every now and then to keep us on the tracks. We need Jesus every single day just as much as the woman did, because at any given point in time, we are train wrecks waiting to happen.

Why did Jesus put the woman through the ringer before answering her request? I don’t know...I do know that God said, “*My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (Isaiah 55:8-9) So I’m content to say, “*I don’t know why you spoke to the woman that way, Jesus; all I know is that you granted her request when she believed in you enough to take you at your word.*”

God wants to fill us with faith but He can't fill a vessel that is already full, and nothing fills us up as much as pride. That's why God has ways of taking away our pride so that He can fill us with Himself.

One day the LORD will return and we will find out how much he DOES have for us. Disease and death will be swallowed up in victory when He casts out sin and pride forever. And instead of leaving us under the table with the dogs and scraps, He will set a place for us at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob at the wedding feast of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem of God. And the mother and her daughter will be there too.

Amen.