

Matthew 15:21-28  
A Woman of Great Faith  
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There is a lot of pressure that parents face. And it stands to reason that the more children you have the more pressure you'll face. No one knows that more than a man named Jim Gaffigan, listen to what he says:

#### Video Clip

Very funny. Though it's tongue and cheek, what comes through in his comedy is the immensity and many-facetedness of your roles, women. You invented multitasking. Scripture even affirms it. Proverbs 31 describes you ladies as leaders in business, providers, moms, strong in mind and body, able to win over a room with kindness and wisdom, not to mention leap over tall buildings with a single bound. And don't try and get between her and the ones she loves, because mama bear is fierce.

This morning we meet a woman who comes running to Jesus in sheer desperation, because her child, her world, is coming apart. Let's listen...

**And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.<sup>22</sup> And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."<sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us."<sup>24</sup> He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."<sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."<sup>26</sup> And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."<sup>27</sup> She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly**

This seems like an odd choice for Mother's Day, Jesus is being rude to a mom. This woman has thrown herself before him in desperation, and Jesus just ignores her. That seems out of character for Jesus. Was Jesus just having a bad day? Maybe we should go with a different text for Mother's Day.

But here's what I've learned about Jesus, and about the women in my life, they are teachers. Just this week my mom was teaching my kids the very same card games her mom taught me as a child. And what do teachers do? Give tests. And those tests don't make sense on the surface. A theologian by the name of Walter Wink described Jesus' favorite way of testing as: "deliberately induced frustration."

Remember when he told his disciples to feed that crowd of 5,000, all they had were 5 loaves and 2 fish. When he stood at the shore and called out to them, after they had fished all night and not caught a thing. Remember how he said to them "just cast your nets on the other side of the

boat”—sure, as if the side of the boat would make a difference. Another time he told them to cast out a demon he knew they would not be able to cast out.

Jesus loves to throw us in over our heads, by introducing deliberately induced frustration. This is a perfect example.

He and his disciples had retired for a little time away from things, a little R & R. They traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon (map). These were cities along the Mediterranean coast in proximity to one another, but they were also home to Israel’s bitterest enemies, according to the Jewish Historian Josephus.

And while they were there, a Canaanite Woman burst through the crowds to get to Jesus. Now right off the bat, this woman has the odds stacked against her: she was a gentile (not a Jew); she was a pagan (not a God worshipper); and she was a woman (not a man) in a day when this sort of action would have been unheard of.

But if you think that was going to stop her, you probably need to spend more time hearing the stories of your mommies and aunties. No way was a little social convention going to get in her way. Why? Because she was a mom.

“Lord, Son of David, my daughter is suffering.” We know these moms. You can see them all over the place at Riley, or Parkview, or St. Jude. Doctor’s duck behind doorways when she’s coming, because she will not let up.

Having a child is like having your heart walking around on the outside of your body. Your heart goes to Kindergarten; your heart doesn’t make the team, or get the part for which they worked so hard; your heart gets made fun of, or your heart gets rejected, or your heart gets diagnosed with some unwelcomed intruding disease, your heart is broken. Just a few weeks ago Amy and I took Christian to audition for the youth theater camp and was told that he was not old enough, even though it did not say that 1<sup>st</sup> grade needed to be completed. But hearing that director say no, even though it was not intended to be a rejection, made us want to climb over that piano and play it with that director’s ears. When they hurt, we hurt.

They are a part of us, their lives, their emotions, their hurts, hopes, and heartaches are inextricably intertwined with ours. We are of the same substance, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. How can you not experience everything that a family member does?

This mother’s daughter is possessed by a demon, she is held hostage by a power that will not let her go. **Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”<sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her a word.** She cast all her cares on this stranger whom she had only heard stories about. And what does she receive in return? Complete and utter silence. Part 1 of the test.

But will she stop there? Will she let up? Will she allow this circumstance to have its way when Jesus is standing before her? Now comes the disciples part of this test. They weren’t surprised that their rabbi wouldn’t speak to this woman, it would have been in appropriate for him to. But even as she spoke Jesus was paying attention to what his disciples were doing out of the corner of his eye. Would they grasp the depth and width of God’s love for this woman? How wide was it? This? This? This?

When this woman came the disciples said, “send her away.” Then Jesus said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Here Jesus is pretending to agree with them: “you’re right fellas, she’s not our problem, I’ll get rid of her.” But then he doesn’t send her away, does he? As he’s pretending to agree with the disciples he’s thinking: “Are you kidding me? Don’t any of you understand my mission? Are all of you really this clueless? Won’t even one of you stand up for her?”

Now part two of her test, will I risk it all? Will I risk losing my dignity? Will I entrust everything to a total stranger? Any of you who have had a mom or are a mom know that when it’s a matter of well-being, nothing gets in the way of a mom.

The text says: “she knelt before him.” She dug in. She was not going anywhere, and she cried “Lord, help me.”

Back to the disciples: do you feel their tension? Don’t tell me there isn’t a tug of war going on between their heads and their hearts? Up here was this cold theological system and down here were the sobs of a heartbroken mother crying out for her beloved daughter who is in agony.

Is God so little that he was trapped inside the disciples’ prison of prejudice? There would come a day when these very disciples passed this test, but today was not that day.

But for now, the tension just ratcheted up even higher, with Jesus looking at his disciples, testing their reaction as he said crueler and crueler things. Then cruelest of all, it seems, came a racial slur from Jesus: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

So Jesus pushed his disciples: “Is that what she is really? Really? Is this what you want? Do you really want me to send her away? Don’t any of you have an ounce of compassion? Won’t one of you speak up for her? Will you love her?”

“Okay, disciples. Time is up. Close your booklet. End of test. Final grade: zero. Or wait, let’s say an ‘I.’ You’re not there yet. Someday you’ll get there. You will learn to love. In the meantime, you get an incomplete.”

They were lacking God’s compassion. Their cultural blinders wouldn’t let them see the wideness of God’s love that extends and the deep value of every human, even a gentile, pagan woman.

You could add up the mountains, the oceans, the galaxies, the tallest buildings, and the money from every bank account in the world, and still not scratch the surface of the value of a human being. For us Jesus came and for us he died. In the Bible you can tell the value of anything by looking at the one who made it.

In our dining room we have a few framed pictures, but by far the most valuable among them is an 8x11 piece of white paper with various colors of paint smeared around in all directions. It is the work of an up and coming artist named Annie Cornell, who made it when he was 4 years old. It is a priceless work of art, just like each one of you.

Every new baby is a fresh work of art still wet from the Creator’s hand. Our value is not in who we are ourselves or what other people tell us. It’s that as Psalm 8 says: God made us “a little lower than

the angels and crowned us with glory and honor.” What’s true of us is true of every human including that sadly tormented daughter of a gentile Canaanite woman.

Back to the woman. What did she do?

Did she shout her own racial slur back at Jesus? Did she slink back into the crowd with her tail between her legs like a dog? What she did is amazing. She said, “Yes, Lord” (verse 27). That’s the third time she called him Lord. “You’re still my Lord.” And then this: “But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” “Yes, Lord, I know I don’t have a place at the table, and I know I don’t deserve one. But don’t you have just few measly crumbs for me?”

This is one of the most remarkable scenes in the New Testament. This woman said, “Yes, I know what society thinks of me, but I have not come out of my goodness. I have come for your graciousness.”

Her love for her daughter is so deep and her trust in Jesus’ power is so strong that there she is with her relentless faith.

Imagine those disciples standing there watching. Their mouths fell open in wonder. Never had they ever seen a human put such total trust in Jesus or have such amazing, stubborn love. When this woman walked up, they thought they were looking at their inferior. Now here she was interacting with Jesus with trust and intimacy and boldness that put them to shame.

Finally, Jesus turned to face this woman. He tore off his mask. The test was over, and it was time to pass out the grades. Jesus exclaimed, “Woman, great is your faith. Your prayers are answered. Your daughter is healed. Go to the head of the class. You have been my daughter all along.”

In his book called *The Color of Water*, James McBride describes a woman like this, his own mom. In the story told by her son, this mother has 12 children, daughter of Jewish immigrants moved to the United States from Poland in the 1940s. She came to the U.S. with her rabbi father and severely handicapped mother. When her father began abusing her, she ran away and fell in love with a black man who later becomes the pastor of a black Baptist church in Harlem during the 1950s. She also became a Christian. She and her husband had 12 children; then he died suddenly. Here she was, a white woman with 12 black children and no money in a small apartment in Harlem in the 1950s.

Of course we all know how that script was supposed to unfold from there. These troubled kids were supposed to fall under the power of Satan, like this girl in our story, and get into drugs, become addicted, and develop criminal records. For a while it seemed that was going to happen. James McBride says it took his mother ten years to recover from her husband’s death. He said his mother would disappear for hours and nobody would know where she was. She couldn’t make a decision. He writes, “I went to gym class, opened a paper bag from home where I’d put my gym clothes, and found my mother’s underclothing inside. She’d stand for hours at the kitchen sink washing one pot.”

Then he writes these words: “Mama was utterly confused about all but one thing: Jesus....Jesus gave Mommy hope. Jesus was Mommy’s salvation. Jesus pressed her forward. Each and every Sunday, no matter how tired, depressed or broke, she got up early, dressed in her best and headed for church.”

“Well what about the kids?” you ask. “What drugs did they take? What gangs did they join?” Well it turns out, today her kids don’t take drugs. They prescribe them. Their gangs have names like Yale, Columbia, and Harvard. Let me introduce her children: Andrew Dennis McBride M.D. University of Pennsylvania Medical School, then Yale University, today is Director of the Health Department in Stamford, Connecticut. Rosetta McBride, Staff Psychologist for the New York Board of Education. William McBride, MD Yale University, MBA Emory University. David McBride, PhD in History from Columbia University, today is a Department Chair at Penn State.

And on and on through twelve children. The author James McBride, boy number 8, until recently a *Washington Post* reporter, closes by saying, “My mother and I would like to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for his love and faithfulness to all generations.”

This mother was confused about everything in life but Jesus. Somehow if you get Jesus right, the rest seems to fall into place. He is the answer.