

Wrestling With God 1) To Claim Your Place at the Table

Matthew 15:21-28 • 2020-08-30 • Wrestling with God Series



Someone kindly gave our family a dinner bell. It really comes in handy. When the dinner bell rings, our children all suddenly appear out of the woodwork and from the corners of our cul-de-sac. At our house, the table's benches are filled with eight little hungry mouths. One little dog scampers underneath because he knows what's up. Sometimes someone will arrive a moment late and discover the bench on their side of the table is full. But they always know that somewhere around that table there is a spot for them. Some days they just have to look a little harder to find it. Have you ever been led to wonder if there is always room at God's table? We need him to feed us and provide for all our needs. How can we be sure we will always have a spot at his table? Today we begin a new series on "wrestling with God." And we begin by looking at a woman who wrestles to claim her place at God's table. And as we do, we'll see why we can be sure there's a place for us too.

In Matthew 15 we find Jesus heading outside of his usual pasture to the edge of the grazing lands of Israel. Tyre and Sidon were around 40 miles outside of Israel. They contained many non-Jewish people who historically had opposed Israel and led them into great sin. But that was exactly where Jesus was headed. He had to go there now as Mark tells us in order to get away from the crowds. He went there to hide for a while from the opposition and unbelief in Israel.

But Jesus couldn't stay hidden for long, even when near the border of another nation. When he came out of the house where he was staying, a woman started after him and his disciples. She was fixed on calling out to Jesus and kept calling out to him, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon possessed and suffering terribly." Her daughter was suffering under the influence of an evil spirit and it appears that this is more than the usual affliction.

But we know this woman viewed Jesus as more than just a fix-it doctor for demon possession. She called him, "Lord, Son of David." Jesus had been rejected by so many of the men of Israel. He is spurned by those who knew him best. He is wanted dead by the spiritual leaders of the house of David. Even his own disciples took so long to grasp what was meant by, "Lord, and Son of David." Those sitting right at Jesus' table for so long didn't get it. Not even the 5000 who he had so recently fed with bread and the gospel had gotten it. But this woman gets it. This foreigner has faith. She calls Jesus by his proper title. By the title Lord, she is referring to Jesus as the God who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the one who created all things and promised to restore all things and defeat all evil. As Lord he alone has sway over demons and the devil. She called him, "Son of David" because this is a title for the Messiah, the Christ. It was David's son who was promised to have the throne over Israel that would last forever. And David's Son was promised to reign over all the earth. She knew Jesus was her Lord and her king, on David's throne. She knew he was the fulfillment of God's plan.

At first Jesus' response is startling. "Lord, Son of David have mercy on me!" She kept on calling to him. But "Jesus did not answer her a word." The disciples couldn't bear it. Whether because she was embarrassing them or just making it difficult to blend in and get away from the crowds, they wanted Jesus to just answer her and deal with her. He chose silence.

She had to have been struggling with this response! How much silence can you bear? What is your response when you feel as if God is not giving you an answer to prayer? "What about me? Can I have a spot at your table, Lord? Can you pay attention to me?" How do you respond when anyone gives you a silence or a delayed answer? How many days does it take for your pastor to not get back to your email before you feel like he doesn't care? How many silent treatments can a person endure? What about silence before the very face of the Lord, the Son of David himself? I know I've too often given up calling out to God after only one plea unanswered. Take me off your list of great faith candidates. How about you?

But she knew that she wouldn't leave empty handed from God's table. She had heard of the promises regarding the Son of David, and she trusted them. The Son of David would not be a man turning a deaf ear to suffering. His kingdom would be one ruled with justice and peace and mercy unending. Her great faith held to this promise.

Then the woman finally got her answer. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Of course, she knew what this meant. The lost sheep of Israel were the children of Abraham and the people of Israel. God sent the Messiah to rebuild David's fallen house and go after the wandering and lost. This is what God had planned: he chose Abraham out of all people. He gave the promise to Israel that a great nation would come from him. He told king David that his offspring would include a perfect deliverer King, the Messiah. Jesus reinforced this truth by staying nearly all his ministry entirely within the bounds of Israel. He rarely went anywhere beyond Israel. He sent the seventy saying, "Don't go outside Israel, but go to the lost sheep of Israel." And he told the woman from Samaria, "Salvation is from the Jews." The apostle Paul acknowledged that God's plan of salvation was "first for the Jews." This woman was essentially told by Jesus: "I must carry out the work I was sent. I was sent to fulfill the promises to Israel and for Israel." She was not part of Israel. She was a woman from Canaan—a race which Israel failed to exterminate because of their vile unbelief and terrible practices of idolatry. She was on the other side.

How much does it take for you to get discouraged and think, "God's kingdom isn't for me."? This woman saw beyond that. She *kept calling* and now boldly called for another response as she fell before him on her knees. "Lord, help me." She knew the heart of God.

Jesus then reminded her of who she was in God's plan. "It is not right to take the children's bread and give it to their little dogs." Wow. He said that the children of Israel should get the blessings brought by the Son of David first. She would not get anything ahead of them any more than a pet dog would to be fed while the children go hungry.

Our culture often gets great faith upside down at this point. Many will say, "You're special. God loves you because you're special." That's not what he was telling this woman. In fact, I don't see a single place in Scripture where a person outside of Israel is titled, "child" of God and special by mere ethnic birth. Seeing God's plan in history means seeing precisely that his grace is for all even though none deserve it. He didn't choose middle-class, white, suburban or small-town Americans. Nor did he choose German Lutherans. He didn't choose Italians, Romans, or the successful and blessed people of history. And he didn't select your tribe as special. He chose the nation of slaves that came from Jacob, called Israel. He gave them the promise. Jesus the Messiah was born a Jew and lived among the Jews. The Son of David was of the line of Judah. That was God's plan. The Canaanite woman wasn't special by birth. Neither are we.

But she caught that important truth. She knew she wasn't special or deserving anything because of who she was. None of the popular modern translations get her response correct. She only agrees with Jesus. She affirms his statement "Yes, Lord," is what her reply begins with. She is saying, "I am only a mere dog in your house. I don't deserve preferential treatment. I have no promise to be first and ahead of any other. There is no specific promise that you will bless me, a Canaanite woman, before the people of Israel are fed and full." She was more than ok with that. She was before Jesus, knowing he would hear her plea. She knew that she may not be first, but she would not be overlooked.

She had wrestled with God by trusting in his great mercy and promises. She had passed the test and displayed exemplary faith. "Woman, you have great faith!" She saw herself as insignificant, but still able to feed at God's table. There lies her great faith. She saw herself on the fringe of God's house. But still in that house. She may not be the first seated, but she was right at the feet. She may be considered second to the people of Israel, but she wasn't outside the kingdom or unnoticed by the king.

Great faith doesn't say, "I'm special" and end up bargaining with God and demanding his attention. That is pride and foolishness. Great faith isn't being like Peter and asking to walk on the water with Jesus. He sank and was rebuked for weak faith. Great faith doesn't involve being blessed and popular among the influential of your time. The wealthy young man from Israel walked away from Jesus. Great faith doesn't involve keeping God's laws down to dotting your I's and crossing your T's. The leaders of Israel were called out for unbelief, not great faith. Nor is it equated with being an insider among church leaders or congregational positions. Jesus only speaks of two people having great faith. And this is one of them. Like the other she was not of Israel, but from outside. But looking in she knew the Son of David came to rescue Israel and her. She came out to meet him because she knew his kingdom had no limit. The disciples and early Jews struggled to understand the fullness of the kingdom as they struggled to go out to the Gentiles. But great faith sees God's plan in all its fullness, not in selfish pride.

When the Son of David had completed all that was foretold for Israel, he sent his disciples to, "Go and make disciples of all nations." He wanted them to, "preach the good news to all creation." Can you picture her hearing how the Son of David went to the cross and died to take away the sins of the world? Great faith looks at God's plan. Peter rebuked Jesus for this plan. But this woman wasn't one to question God's plan. She humbly saw how great his plan was. Then she would also hear the news of his resurrection and the good news preached. She would hear disciples going outside of Israel to make disciples of all nations. She would receive the baptism and new birth that Jesus sent to not just Israel, but all people.

I wonder if the woman and her daughter didn't have the chance to reflect on the words of Psalm 87. There her home country is mentioned. She came from the region of Tyre. But the rebirth that comes through baptism was foretold in that Psalm. The Lord will write in the register of the peoples: "This one was born in Zion...When he registers the peoples, the LORD will write: 'This one was born there.'" Through our baptism we are born into the household of God. We join this woman and many more through faith as fed and rescued by the Son of David. There is more than room at his table for us. He gives us everything and all of himself!

This is what our missionaries and pastors and teachers all proclaim as we support them and send them out. You were once not a people, but now you are the people of God. You once were apart from the household, now you are born again into God's house. He has promised favor and there is no nation, no culture, no people, no individual so insignificant that they will not also in grace receive bread. In lowliness and humility, we have been brought into his house. The people of Israel first received and saw. They believed and testified. They were handed the bread of life. Now the rest of God's church is ready for his good gifts to come. Eagerly like the dog under the table we know we will not be overlooked in the end. Humbly, not proud. Confident, not fearful. No less satisfied, no less a part of God's plan of grace.

"Woman, you have great faith." Her daughter was healed. Her hope was realized. She stands on the top of all the men of Israel as the Canaanite woman, the one with great faith. She may have been a lowly outsider, a dog under the table and dreaming of blessings to come. She would be fed and satisfied at his feet. So it is with us as each one of us takes our place at his table.