

# Great Faith

Matthew 15:1-39

Key Verse: 15:28

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

Recently, experts say that the population of the world has exceeded 7 billion. One of the symbolic 7 billionth babies was Danica May Camacho, born on Oct 31, 2011 in the Philippines. Some people think that overpopulation is the number one problem in the world. What do you think the number one problem in the world is? Some think it is hunger, clean water, racism, capitalism, or even religion as the number one problem. While these are all very serious and real problems in the world, I was reminded of a quote I heard that says, **“The number one problem in the world, is myself.” What does this mean? It means that what we need to change is within our hearts.**

In today’s passage we are given a contrast between the Pharisees and a Canaanite woman. The Pharisees seemed very pious because they performed many rituals and religious activities, while the Canaanite woman seemed to be lowly and pitiful. But Jesus called the Pharisees ‘hypocrites’ and praised the woman for her great faith. Here we learn that God sees our hearts, not our outward religious Christian activities. In the end, how we live before Jesus is most important. We need to see ourselves before God’s eyes. This passage is quite simple, showing us three truths: God’s desire, our problem, and the solution. Through this passage, let’s honestly examine ourselves and learn how to resolve the problem of the human heart. Let's come to Jesus just as we are and ask his mercy.

## **I. God Wants Our Hearts (1-9)**

This passage begins with an accusation. These Pharisees came from Jerusalem. They had high human authority. They came to investigate Jesus. The conflict and tension between Jesus and the Pharisees has been increasing more and more since Matthew 9. In that chapter Jesus publicly forgave the sins of a paralyzed man. Since then, the Pharisees have been trying to find anything to accuse Jesus of, in hopes to kill him (12:14). In verse 2 they accused Jesus’ disciples, **“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!”** Why didn't the disciples wash their hands before they ate? That sounds so dirty. Maybe it's because the disciples were always hungry, so hungry they had no time to wash their hands. But basically, the

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reason the disciples didn't wash their hands was because they enjoyed real freedom in Jesus, and no longer felt bound to meaningless traditions.

Not washing your hands doesn't seem to be a big deal. But to the Pharisees, this was a very serious problem. To understand where this question comes from, we should understand that the Mosaic Law does include a number of specific conditions that makes a person unclean and thus disqualifies them from worship. But the elders developed "extra rules" than those of the Bible, called the "Halakah". These rules were added with the intention to create a buffer so as not to break the actual commands of God. In regards to the washing of hands, in the Bible, only priests were required to wash at the Temple (Ex 30:19,20). But in these extra rules is the demand that everyone wash their hands in order to be pure. But eventually, this washing of the hands was no longer an actual cleaning of the hands and had just become a ceremony. As time passed, the original intention of these added rules was lost. Then keeping the traditions started to carry more and more weight, until they became even more important than keeping the command of God.

How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees' accusation? Look at verse 3. **"Jesus replied, 'And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?'"** The Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the tradition of the elders. But Jesus countered with the fact that the Pharisees broke the commands of God for the sake of their traditions. While it was a big deal to the Pharisees to break the traditions, to Jesus, breaking the command of God was a much more serious problem. Jesus exposed their abuse of tradition in verses 4 to 6. Jesus begins with the word of God. Jesus said, **"For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.'"** God's commands are absolute. God's word should be kept absolutely without compromise. Then in verse 5 and 6a Jesus says, **"But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition."** Jesus made the contrast by saying, **"For God said,"** and then **"But you say."** The contrast is God's words versus the words of man. The example Jesus gives is of a tradition based on Leviticus 27, which says God's claim on property supersedes all others. A person could thus pledge so much of their wealth to God they couldn't help their aging parents. This tradition provided a way to hide resentment from their parents behind a seemingly sacrificial spiritual decision. In this way they would nullify the word of God.

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One way Christians do what the Pharisees did is by resting in the secure and sentimental emotions that arise from old and familiar patterns and traditions. I've been in UBF since the day I was born. In UBF, we have many wonderful and great practices, sometimes referred to as our "UBF Legacy." After all, writing testimonies, and doing daily bread, and going fishing are wonderful things to do. But there is a pitfall to be careful of. There is a temptation to become too focused on keeping our UBF legacy, and lose sight of what God really sees and values in us. Sometimes we make many rules to make ourselves feel holy. I see this in my own heart in many ways. I have tried to keep my heart pure by following many rules. When I keep these rules, I feel good about myself, but I can hide my dirty heart behind these things and it makes me quick to judge others. Instead of trying to keep many rules, my focus should be giving God an honest heart.

Jesus continues with some strong words in verse 7. He said to the Pharisees, **“You hypocrites!”** Jesus reveals their problem by quoting Isaiah. They did many religious activities. They honored God with their lips. They looked like they were worshipping God. But their hearts were far from God, and their worship was in vain. Their teachings were not the words of God; they were human rules.

**Here we learn two things. First, God wants us to love him and honor him with our hearts. Second, God wants us to obey the Word of God, not rely on human rules.** In Isaiah's prophecy, the words “Far from me” are spatial words referring to relationships. The words of Isaiah revealed that the problem with the Pharisees was that they didn't give God what he really wanted, their hearts. Dt 6:5 says, **“Love the Lord you God with all your heart.”** What is the heart? Surely we know Jesus isn't talking about our physical organ. He's talking about the heart that is the most central part of a person. God wants our hearts, and not just part of our hearts either, he wants all of our hearts. This shows us that God wants something very deep and personal from us. Our God is an intimate God. If we know that this is what God wants, then it challenges us even more. It is much easier to give God behavior, than it is to give God our hearts. Since this is what God wants, let's honor him and worship him with all our hearts.

## **II. Our Hearts Are Defiled (10-20)**

Look at verse 10. Now Jesus turned his attention to the crowd because they were greatly influenced by the religious leaders. He said to them, **“Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.”** After this exchange, the disciples became fearful with the way Jesus handled the Pharisees. They seemed

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worried about offending them. Jesus implied that the Pharisees were not plants planted by God. They were blind guides leading people astray because they did not see what God really wants. So the disciples did not need to be afraid of them. For God would pull them up by their roots.

Then Peter asked Jesus to explain the parable. In the past, Jesus was very patient with the disciples, but his time he said, **“Are you still so dull?”** In other words, “Are you so dumb?” But Jesus did explain. He said that what really defiles a person has nothing to do with external things. What you eat only goes into the mouth, then into the stomach, and then out of the body. We know this process well, we do it everyday. With my new born daughter, from her first day of life she knew how to cry and how to eat, and how to poop. That’s all she did for several weeks. This process is related to our health and is important. My daughter doing this well made her very healthy. It’s clear that this process doesn’t make us unclean. Rather it is the things that come out of our mouths which is an expression of our heart that defiles us.

In verses 19 and 20, Jesus explains that what comes out of our hearts is only evil: murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are the second half of the Ten Commandments. Our hearts are only breaking the commands of God, this is what defiles us. People like to think they are naturally good, and if they do evil, it is because they have been oppressed by society or wounded by their parents, or some other excuse. Jesus shows that the truth is that evil begins inside, in the motives and desires of the heart. In other words, we sin because we are sinners. All evil comes from our own hearts, we have no one to blame.

My son, is so cute and absolutely adorable. But the fact of the matter is that he is a sinner too. We don’t teach our children to say, “No,” but that quickly becomes all our children’s favorite word. We are all sinners from birth. We are terrible people, and terrible sinners. Since Adam’s fall, our hearts have degenerated and become rebellious until God said of the people in Noah’s time that every **“inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.”** We might subconsciously think that we can clean up our hearts by keeping a clean and well behaved outward appearance. We can try to fix our hearts on our own, making many human rules, and trying to live a very pious life, but this doesn’t work. The more we try, the more we realize how terrible we are. Jeremiah 7:9a says, **“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”**

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So here is our dilemma: God wants our hearts. But how can we give God such filthy, evil hearts? Apostle Paul was a great man of God. But his testimony was this, “**What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord.**” (Rom 7:24,25) When we truly accept how terrible we are, we realize that we need Jesus. 1 John 1:7b says, “**The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.**” That’s what Jesus did for us. He hung on the cross, and suffered a criminal’s death, shedding his blood, for the sake of our hearts. He is the only solution to our evil hearts. He is our Savior. He is our Redeemer. We need Jesus who became unclean, so that we who are unclean may be made clean through his blood. Let’s come to Jesus just as we are.

## III. Jesus Accepts Great Faith (21-39)

Look at verse 21. After the confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus withdrew to Tyre and Sidon, which was Gentile territory about 30 miles from Gennesaret. This was a good strategy to get away from the Pharisees. This was also an opportunity to spend some quiet time with his disciples. But this quiet time was disrupted. A Canaanite woman came to him crying out, “**Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.**” She called Jesus, “**Lord.**” This shows her reverence of Jesus. She then calls Jesus, the “**Son of David.**” While the pious religious leaders refused to acknowledge Jesus as any of these things, here we see a dirty Canaanite woman with faith to see who Jesus really is. She said, “**have mercy on me,**” even though she wasn’t the one that was ill. This shows her intimate closeness and love she had for her daughter. Her daughter’s suffering became her own suffering. She had a compassionate heart for her daughter, so she brought this problem to Jesus.

How did Jesus respond? Look at verse 23a. “**Jesus did not answer a word.**” It is quite shocking that Jesus did not say a word. At first glance, this seems very rude, and unlike Jesus. There are 3 possible reasons for this. Jesus may have been so grieved by the death of John the Baptist and bothered by the pride of the Pharisees that he didn’t want to be bothered by this gentile woman. Or, Jesus’ seemingly rude response may have been an opportunity for him to test her faith. Or, this may have provided an opportunity to show his disciples the contrast between the pride of the Pharisees and the humility of the Canaanite woman.

Whatever the reason, Jesus seemed to ignore her plea. But her cries persisted, “**Son of David have mercy on me!**” until the disciples were bothered and asked Jesus to send her away. Then Jesus answered, “**I was sent only to the**

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**lost sheep of Israel.”** Jesus may have said these words because he wanted to be faithful to his mission and because he did not go to this region to minister to the Gentiles. Then the woman came and knelt before Jesus, **“Lord, help me!”** she said. She had a persistent and undying spirit. Jesus replied, **“It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.”** Jesus’ response seems to be extremely harsh and offensive. It was an expression of what this woman probably knew very well as a Gentile, Jewish exclusivism. While Jesus did call this woman a dog, the word he uses here in Greek doesn’t refer to wild and savage, street dogs, but to a lovely domesticated dog. While still extremely offensive, for no one wants to be called a dog, there is some affection in Jesus’ words. That being said, the Canaanite woman had good reason to be extremely offended and upset. But how did she respond?

Let’s read verse 27 together. **“Yes it is, Lord,”** she said. **“Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.”** We know this scene very well. In the home of any dog owner, the dog sits at the feet of everyone during dinner, with puppy eyes, and tongue hanging out waiting for the crumbs to fall to the floor, or the leftovers to be handed over. Her response is remarkable. Her response shows her humility. It shows she knew that even the crumbs from the table would be enough for her.

What was Jesus' response? Let's read verse 28 together. **“Then Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed at that moment.”** Jesus saw the woman's faith. He said, **“You have great faith!”** Wow. How could she have such great faith? Her situation, as a mother of a daughter who was suffering so much in a hopeless illness could have led her to despair and become fatalistic. She may have tried many things, and endured many sufferings. And in the course of time, trying to help her all she could, she realized there was nothing she can do. But she did not despair. She came to Jesus. She didn’t give up. Her compassion for her daughter drove her to Jesus. So even though Jesus called her a “dog,” she was already broken. Her humility gave her strength and perseverance to continue to ask Jesus for mercy. This woman gives us an example of what true saving faith really is.

Here we see the stark contrast between the Pharisees and the Canaanite woman. The Pharisees were God’s chosen people, they were religious leaders. They studied the Law diligently and kept many rituals and traditions meticulously. Outwardly they looked pious, but their hearts were far from God. Jesus called these people “hypocrites.”

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On the other hand, this woman was a Gentile, regarded as a dog. By Mosaic Law she was unclean. She wasn't very impressive from the outside. Her social status was low, and her daughter's illness made her look so pitiful and desperate. But she was humble and recognized Jesus as Lord, and accepted Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah. So Jesus recognized her and even honored her for her great faith. Here we find a paradox. It is only when we realize that we are nothing but dogs underneath the table, that we can become children who sit at the table. It is God who made this dirty woman worthy. Acts 15:9 says that **"God purifies our heart by faith."** To the people's eyes, this woman was nothing, but to Jesus she was great. Jesus' standard of evaluation is quite different from that of the world. Jesus sees our heart. Those who are humble and have faith in him, Jesus lifts up and honors. But those who are proud, God opposes (1 Pet 5:5b). In the end, the only thing that we need is Jesus' mercy. We are worth nothing more. Our evil hearts should lead us to see how much we need Jesus. The Canaanite woman is a wonderful example of someone who understood it. "I am nothing but a dog, I desperately need Jesus' mercy. Even the crumbs I do not deserve." When we understand this, Jesus will lift us up and honor us.

When God chose King David to be the successor of Saul, many people were surprised, but God told Samuel, **"The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."** David was only a boy at this time. And God trained him for many years serving under Saul and then running from him through the wilderness. Through out all of these struggles, we see David's humility. Then God blessed him, and made him King. In the course of time, David got comfortable and became proud. He sinned against God by taking the wife of another man as his own, and then murdering the man to cover up his sin. Though David had been a great and humble King, when he became proud, God rejected him. But when he repented and humbled himself, God gave him grace. The general principle is that anyone who comes to Jesus and humbly asks his mercy can be regarded as great. The moment I think I deserve anything, I've missed the point.

Look at verses 29-39. After helping this woman, Jesus left there and returned to the Sea of Galilee. This drew crowds of the lame, blind, crippled, and mute. These are more dirty looking people from the outside. But when they came to Jesus in humility, Jesus had compassion on them and healed them all. In Jesus' compassion he also fed the entire crowd with just 7 loaves and a few small fish.

Through this passage we realize that we are all filthy and dirty. But when we come to Jesus just as we are, he never rejects us. His arms are open to accept us

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and cleanse our dirty hearts. In order to do this Jesus, gave up his throne in heaven, and became a dog himself. The most beautiful and holy Son of God became worthless and filthy like each of us. He bore all our sin, all our shame, and shed his blood on the cross, so that we could become children of God who sit at his heavenly table. Praise Jesus who is our Savior. Praise Jesus who purifies our hearts.