



Study Series

Follow Me: Week Eleven

Faith - From following to belief: Marc Rader

Bible

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV)

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

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.

Sermon Summary

As we near the end of this series we need to turn our attention to faith. Faith plays an important role in the miracles of Jesus and with faith, we are told, all things are possible. At the same time, however, the disciples are several times described by Jesus as those with little faith. There are two examples of great faith in Matthew's account: the faith of the centurion (8:5-13) and that of the Canaanite woman in today's passage. In this brief story we learn several important things about faith.

First, we are reminded that faith can blossom in the most unexpected places. The description of this woman as a Canaanite emphasises her outsider status. She is not just a Gentile, but a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the traditional enemies of the people of Israel and it is a little unexpected that she has great faith. Unexpected, but not totally surprising. Remember that Jesus' genealogy contains five women, two of whom – Rahab and Ruth – were foreigners who expressed faith in God. This woman is like those faithful women.

Second, it is important to note that it is the woman's need that makes her faith visible. Like a spy in some thriller using powder to expose the infrared alarm system, need makes faith visible. Her daughter's suffering drove her to exercise her faith in approaching Jesus. It is when she approaches Jesus that we see the most significant feature of her faith according to Matthew; her persistence.

She follows after Jesus and His disciples, crying out for mercy. What is strange is that Jesus says nothing to her. She persists to the point that the disciples urge Jesus to send her away. His response is to remind them that His mission is to the "lost sheep of Israel". He does not, however, send her away and she persists, eventually coming and falling at His feet and asking for his help. Once again Jesus takes us by surprise and reiterates His priority to the children of Israel. At first glance He is being a bit rude, seemingly calling her a dog, but it is a simple comparison demonstrating priority. He might have said, it isn't right to have dessert before you've finished your vegetables. She persists and answers in the same analogy suggesting that even the dogs eat food that falls from the table. Jesus declares that she has great faith and grants her request.

This shows us a few other things about faith. To begin with it is worth noting that Jesus invites persistent faith. He does not send the woman away, and does not outright reject her request, but invites her persistence. Jesus is always on the lookout for faith. Second, this shapes His mission. Yes, He was sent to Israel, but He was really sent to all who have faith in Him. Jew or Gentile didn't matter; faith did.

This reminds us that faith is ultimately not about what you know but who you know. This woman believed something about Jesus, namely that He could help her daughter and that the children (in the parable) would not miss or begrudge her the crumb she needed. So great was Jesus' power that a crumb was all she needed.

All of this urges us to recognise our need and bring our need to Jesus in faith. And in case we fear we don't have enough faith, note that Jesus is sensitive to faith. Like a seismograph that picks up tremors in the earth that we wouldn't, Jesus is sensitive to faith in those who come to Him. This woman probably didn't have a completely formed faith or understanding of Jesus, but He felt her faith and, to use the image of a seismograph, felt an earthquake. What do you need from Jesus? What do you believe about him? Bring your request and your faith to Him. He invites faith and is sensitive to it and responds to what He finds.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation, their depth comes from a willingness to engage with the implications of our reflections for how we live our lives. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Jesus seems to point to persistence as a central feature of faith. Where in your life has need inspired you to be persistent? This might be in your faith or it may have appeared somewhere else; a medical diagnosis prompting the need to get fit for example. What are the challenges and rewards of persistence? Share your reflections with the group.
2. Read Matthew 15:21-28 aloud. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that seemed to stand out. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain why they stood out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to a word or phrase, take time, and share what you've been lead to.
3. What aspect of faith in this story strikes you as most significant?
4. How would you have responded to Jesus' soft refusals? Would you have persisted? What makes persistence so difficult?

5. If faith is more “who you know” than “what you know”, how does this change your understanding of faith?
6. What do you believe about Jesus? What do you truly believe He is able to do and accomplish in your life and in the world?

Prayer

In the light of your reflections on question 6, take some time to pray for each other, that you might continue to grow in your knowledge of, and relationship with, Jesus. Invite the Holy Spirit to stretch your faith as you invite Jesus to be at work in situations you may once have thought impossible to change.