

**A SYROPHENICIAN MOTHER**

Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30

**Intro:** Today is Mother's Day. The first known suggestion in the United States that a day be set aside to honor mothers, was made in 1872 by Julia Ward Howe who was the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Various days were observed until 1907 when a woman in Philadelphia, Anna Jarvis, started a campaign to make Mother's Day a national day to be observed each year. She was the one who selected the second Sunday of May as Mother's Day. But it was not until 1915, after a resolution had been passed in both houses of Congress the year before, that President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday of May as Mother's Day. Anna Jarvis was the one who originated the idea of wearing a red carnation on that day if your mother were still living, a white carnation if she had died. I remember my Dad bought carnations for all of us children when we were young. He and my mother wore white carnations, and all of us children wore red. And most people in our church observed the same custom. But it is not observed now like it used to be.

But those of us who know something about the Bible, know that it was in the days of Moses when God gave Moses the Law, that in the ten commandments, the fifth commandment was:

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee (Ex. 20:12).

And the Apostle Paul, in writing the epistle to the Ephesians, and addressing children, taught that that commandment was still in effect. Let me read to you what he said:

- 1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right.
- 2 Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;)
- 3 That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth (Eph. 6:1-3).

Paul was not speaking of a Mother's Day, or of a Father's Day, but he was teaching children that this was to be their way of living. They were to honor their parents every day – all through their lives!

But this does not mean that it is wrong to have a Mother's Day, and then a Father's Day, as long as we are not separating Mothers and Fathers. They are one, and to honor one is to honor the other. But a chapter like

Proverbs 31 would certainly indicate that it is right, and something that we should always do, to honor the wife, the mother, of a family. We all have mothers, and we all have fathers. And we need to honor them. The home situation in America today is really deplorable in far too many instances, but Mother's Day, if observed in a Biblical way, is one way of reminding us what our homes and our families should be.

The Bible has a lot to say about ladies. On past Mother's Day I have spoken more than once on Hannah, Samuel's mother. And I have spoken on Mary, the mother of our Lord. Once I spoke about Eunice and Lois, the mother and grandmother of Timothy. All of these ladies were very godly women – all of them were Jewish.

On this Mother's Day I want to speak to you and with you about a Gentile mother. Her name is not given in Scripture. We know that she had one daughter, but we don't know her name either. Nothing is said about her husband, nor are we told if she had other children. The account in Scripture is focused upon this mother and her daughter. The daughter was demon-possessed, and that is what brought this mother to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The incident that we will consider today is recorded in two of the four Gospels – in Matthew and in Mark; Matthew 15, verses 21 through 28, and Mark 7, verses 24 through 30.

Mark called her a "Syrophenician by nation, and said that she was a Greek. This probably meant that she spoke Greek and that originally she had followed the Greek religion with all of its mythology and idolatry. Matthew tells us that she was a Canaanite. So her people were some of the original occupants of the land which the Lord gave to His people Israel in the days of Joshua. As you move north from Jerusalem in the land of Israel, you leave Judea where Jerusalem is located, go through Samaria, then through Galilee, and finally reach Phoenicia along the coast. This is where the cities of Tyre and Sidon are located. Some historians believe that Syrophenician people were a mixed race of Syrians and Phoenicians – half and half. At any rate, they were Gentiles, idolaters, thoroughly pagan.

Humanly speaking, the possibility that this woman would be brought to faith in Christ was non-existent. But we never can tell where the Spirit of

God is going to work. Often He claims His people in the most unlikely places. Take Rahab, for one example. And Ruth, for another. Think of Naaman the Syrian, and the Ethiopian eunuch. And what about Saul of Tarsus, and the Philippian jailor? And the list grows and grows, not only in Scripture, but everywhere throughout the world since the Bible was completed. One of the Japanese young ladies we were with this past week, wrote to Lucille and me after we got home, and said, "How did He find me, and pick me from all the people?"

Isaac Watts gave expression to this amazing situation which has been repeated thousands upon thousands of times, when he wrote his hymn, "How sweet and awful is the place." The third verse goes like this:

Why was I made to hear Thy voice, and enter while there's room,  
When thousands make a wretched choice,  
And rather starve than come?

We are all trophies of grace, aren't we? Such was the case of this Syro-phenician woman. The Holy Spirit has not seen fit to reveal to us the circumstances under which she was saved, but she appears in Scripture as one who knew the Lord although this situation may have been the very first time she saw the Lord.

But she had a burden, a very great burden. And it had to do with her daughter.

One thing that really impressed Lucille and me during our time in Japan was the great concern, the very great concern, that those dear Japanese believers had for their children. Most of them were not raised in Christian homes, and they wanted to know how to raise their children so that they would be saved, would love the Lord like they did, and would walk with Him. And it was wonderful to see that.

We are not told how it was that this lady's daughter became demon-possessed, but it is very likely that it was through being involved in the Greek religion. Demon possession was very common in those days, and it was like the Devil was doing all that he could to keep people from coming to the Lord. This lady had come out of paganism, and she wanted to bring her daughter with her. Her appeal to the Lord for her daughter was like any Christian parent would plead with God for the salvation of his or her children.

Now let us follow her encounter with the Lord on this occasion. Notice first:

## **I. HOW SHE ADDRESSED THE LORD.**

Matthew tells us that she called the LORD, “O LORD, Thou son of David.” She recognized His Deity, and she knew that He was the Messiah. How did she find this out? The same way Simon Peter did.

In the very next chapter of Matthew we have what our Lord said to him after he made that great confession of his faith: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). And immediately the Lord said this:

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven (Matt. 16:17).

How did you find out and become convinced that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God? How did I? We didn’t discover it on our own, not is the source of our information traceable to the person who told us about the Savior. It was a work that the Father did for us.

And did you notice that she was asking for “mercy”? And she was asking it for herself. She knew how merciful God had been to her when she was saved, and she was asking for more mercy in order that her daughter might be delivered from the clutches of the Evil One. She said her daughter was “grievously vexed.” The NKJV translates these words, “severely demon-possessed.” This woman knew that she was up against the forces of the Evil One, and that she needed more help than she could give her daughter, and more help than any other person could give her – EXCEPT FOR THE LORD! Her appeal for mercy meant that she knew that neither she nor her daughter deserved what they were asking for. Mark tells us that “she besought Him that He would cast forth the demon out of her daughter” Mark 7:26).

Now let us notice that:

## **II. SHE RECEIVED THREE DEVASTATING REBUFFS.**

For these we go to Matthew’s account. The Lord snubbed her. The

disciples wanted to get rid of her. And then the Lord seemed to reject her request.

**A. The Lord “answered her not a word” (Matt. 15:23a).**

How crushing this must have been to her! This is a clear instance of unanswered prayer. And, if this woman had been left to her own resources, she would have given up. What she wanted more than anything else was a positive response and immediate action from the Lord. Humanly speaking, it is hard to believe, or we might say, difficult to believe, when all we receive from the Lord is total silence.

The second rebuff came from the disciples.

**B. They told the Lord to send her away (Matt. 15:23b).**

But they were mistaken. She was not *crying after them*; she made her appeal directly to the Lord. The disciples had seen many cases like this, and probably were tired of people coming to the Lord.

And so it seemed like not only did the Lord have no time for her, but His disciples had no time either. Notice how our prayers often are in conflict with each other. The woman wanted support from the disciples, but she got none. That made trusting the Lord even more difficult.

Then came a third jolt.

**C. The Lord spoke and told her that He had not been sent to the Gentiles, “but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24).**

This seemed to close the door completely and finally. She was powerless to change His mission.

Probably most people would have gone away at this point, thoroughly discouraged. Everything that happened seemed to be giving her a final “no.”

But this is where we see how strange to us are the ways of the Lord, and that so often when doors seem to be closed, God, by His grace, enables us

to keep on trusting. We can see that the Lord was trying her faith. Peter mentioned in his first epistle that the trial of our faith amounts to being “tried with fire” (1 Pet. 1:7). God tries our faith, not to destroy it, but to strengthen it. And that is exactly what He was doing with this woman.

So what was her response?

### **III. HER RESPONSE TO THE LORD.**

You have it in Matt. 15:25. (Read.) How amazing this is! Instead of being angry, and turning and going away, she came closer to the Lord and worshiped Him, and said, “Lord, help me.”

Mark did not record the rebuffs that she had received, but simply said that she “came and fell at His feet” (Mark 7:25).

Do you remember how Jacob wrestled with the Lord all night, and finally the Lord said, “Let me go, for the day breaketh” (Gen. 32:26). And Jacob said, “I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.”

After all of the suffering that Job went through, losing all that he had, losing his children, and losing his health, he said, speaking of the Lord, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). That was all that was left for Job, death, but he declared that he would die trusting the Lord.

So this Syrophenician woman joined an elite host, didn't she? But her reaction, and Jacob's reaction, and Job's reaction, are not to their credit. But these are examples of how God works in the hearts of His people so that they will continue to trust Him when it seems that they have trusted Him long enough, and should stop.

What a sight we have here! Can you visualize it? She may have been the only believer in her village. She may have told her family and friends that she was going to seek help from her Lord. But now it seemed that her journey was in vain. But her heart would not allow her to give up, and so she said to the Lord, “Lord, help me.” What a simple prayer! Her faith was still there! One thing she knew, that if the Lord did not help her, there was no one else who could!

As I think of this I am reminded of the time when the Lord was speaking to some of His disciples about His sovereignty in salvation. And some of His disciples couldn't accept His teaching, and so the Apostle John wrote in His Gospel years afterward, "From that time many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him" (John 6:66). They went away, and they never came back! But this exchange followed between the Lord and Peter:

67 Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?

68 Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.

69 And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God (John 6:67-69).

This was probably what was going through this Syrophenician mother's heart. If she turned away from the Lord, who could help her? And the answer was, "No one!" So she stayed, and continued to pray, "Lord, help me!"

But her testing was not over.

#### **IV. THE LORD'S NEXT REBUFF (Matt. 15:26).**

The Jews referred to the Gentiles as "dogs." And the Lord used this language which seemed really cruel. But this Gentile, Canaanite woman rose to the challenge.

#### **V. HER RESPONSE TO THE LORD (Matt. 15:27).**

She agreed with the Lord. She had not been saying that the Lord should take anything away from the Jews. But she reminded Him that the dogs always got some crumbs which the children dropped on floor, intentionally or unintentionally, *and all she was asking for was just the crumbs.*

She was not like Naaman the Syrian when Elisha did not even come out to meet him, but sent a messenger to tell him to go wash in the Jordan seven times, and that he would then be healed of his leprosy. Do you remember Naaman's response?

11 But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place,

and recover the leper.

12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage (2 Kings 5:11-12).

This Syrophenician mother agreed that she was no more than a dog, totally unworthy of the blessing that she was seeking. And she did not want to deprive any Jew the blessing of the Lord. But she firmly believed that by the crumbs falling from the Lord's table, her daughter could be delivered from the demon. What amazing faith she demonstrated.

## **VI. THE BLESSING OF THE LORD (Matt. 15:28).**

By faith the Syrophenician mother prevailed, and her daughter was delivered from the demon.

**Concl:** When Dr. V. Raymond Edman was the President of Wheaton College, he had a chapel message that he brought to the students early in the school year when he knew that some were discouraged, perhaps homesick, and ready to leave school. And the title of his message was, "It's too soon to quit." I never went to Wheaton, and so I never heard that message, but I read it in one of his books.

I have thought of that statement many times in relation to prayer. I know what it is to pray and pray and pray, and yet not see the answer. And I am sure that most of you have had this experience too – not just once, but many times. At any point in the Syrophenician woman's contact with the Lord, *it would have been too soon to quit.*

May the Lord give us more mothers who will not give up as they pray for their children, that the Lord would save them, and keep them, and use them for His glory. We are not told what happened to that demon-possessed daughter, but we know that she was delivered. And there was great rejoicing in that home. Perhaps, we don't for sure, but perhaps this mother and daughter became mighty instrument of blessing in God's hand in turning others to the Lord.

By God's grace, a praying mother who will not quit, who refuses to give up, can be a mighty instrument in God's hands if only for those in her own family.