

**Title:** Crumbs from the Master's Table

**Subtitle:** Humble, Yet Bold, Access to God's Grace

**Video URL:** <https://youtu.be/6HNkiM6Gj50?si=UCLSDMMq7S4BFsfp>

Today, we wade into the deep things of God as Jesus touches on the election of Israel. Yet, as the rubber meets the road, we are presented with two stories, each dealing with severely distressed, broken individuals. The first is a desperate Gentile woman with a Syrophenician background whose daughter is demon-possessed. The second is a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech.

The first encounter takes place outside of Israel's boundaries. Tyre and Sidon are not Jewish communities. Jesus and his disciples are keenly aware of this. They left Galilee and Israel for some privacy and rest, where the crowds would not follow. It was a time when Jesus needed a break from the non-stop demands of the crowds that constantly followed him. Knowing this, the disciples wanted to send her away, but she would not be denied and begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Mark goes to great lengths to say that she was "***A Greek, a Syrophenician by race,***"<sup>1</sup> meaning that her ancestors were Canaanites and Moabites—historical enemies of the Jewish people, who regularly practiced the worst kind of heathen idolatry, including the sacrifice of their children on altars dedicated to their fertility god, Baal. This incidence, therefore, not only highlights the cultural and religious barriers between Jews and Gentiles but also the preference given to Jews by God's election. Thus, in response to this woman's request, Jesus says, "***Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.***"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 7:26

<sup>2</sup> Mark 7:27 ("Throw it to the dogs" is also used in Matthew's parallel account, see Matthew 15:26

Honestly, this analogy with dogs seems shocking. Some of you might even ask, *Is this the same person we all know who has a reputation for kindness, tenderness, and compassion?* Yet, as difficult as this passage might be, a humble, believing person who truly loves Christ takes everything Jesus says and tries to learn from it. In this case, the word that both Matthew and Mark use in Jesus' reply is not the word for a scavenging canine (κύōn) that was disdained in ancient times. Instead, the word that is used is one that Strong's Concordance defines as "a little dog, a house dog."<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, a cairn terrier is derived from this same Greek word. So Toto is not just famous for his appearance in The Wizard of Oz.

As Jesus used the word, it was meant to suggest that the children of Israel had the priority of eating first. This woman doesn't argue but agrees with him and answers, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."<sup>4</sup> Her affirmation could also be translated as "certainly, even so."<sup>5</sup> While a proud, unhumbled heart would not have borne any reference to unequal status, a humble, believing heart takes everything Christ says, whether they understand it or not, and puts the best possible construction on it.

Canaanites, with a Syrophenician background, had historical baggage in their relations with the Jews. And as Gentiles, they were "*strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*"<sup>6</sup> But given Paul's perspective, the Mosaic moral Law finds both Jews and Gentiles guilty before God. The Law declares, "There is none who is righteous, no, not one."<sup>7</sup> The Canaanite woman

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<sup>3</sup> Strong's Concordance, # 2965: a little dog, a house dog

<sup>4</sup> Mark 7:28

<sup>5</sup> Strong's Concordance, #3483 nai (nahee), Definition: yes (indeed), certainly

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 2:12

<sup>7</sup> Romans 3:10, A quote Paul uses from Psalm 14:3

instinctively knew this and openly accepted her low estate and need for God's mercy as she only asked for the crumbs that fell from the Master's table. As such, she is an example for us all.

Our Rite One liturgy for Holy Eucharist in the Book of Common Prayer supports this unassuming attitude when it gives us the "Prayer of Humble Access." It says, in part, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table," followed by that all-important "but... thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy..." This prayer puts us shoulder-to-shoulder with the Canaanite woman as we confess our present reality: we are all unworthy, yet the Good News of the Gospel freely brings us to the table of God's mercy and grace to feed on the bread of heaven. Such grace is what James, in our New Testament lesson, calls the "Law of Liberty."<sup>8</sup>

Under the New Covenant, that perfect Law has no place for the prejudice and partiality that considers one person better than another. Therefore, the righteousness of God is granted to all—rich and poor, Jew and Gentile—through faith in Jesus Christ and is available to all who believe.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, Matthew's Gospel, written for a Jewish audience, includes in Jesus' answer to the Canaanite woman, "***O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.***"<sup>10</sup>

Her story reminds me of a verse from the famous hymn, Rock of Ages, which states, "In my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." In a nutshell, this was a foundational principle of the Protestant Reformation, which Paul expressed in his epistle to the Ephesians when he wrote, "***For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your***

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<sup>8</sup> James 1:25 "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does"

<sup>9</sup> Romans 3:22 paraphrased

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 15:28

***own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.***<sup>11</sup>

But James reminds us that such faith obligates us to bear fruit. The next lesson supports this grace-filled concept by how Jesus interacts with a deaf and mute man.

A speech therapist named William Nuttall, who also had a history of stuttering, maintains that when alone, he had no problem speaking. Only when talking to other people, did he have trouble being fluent. This observation led him to believe that the social environment of attitudes, evaluations, and opinions constituted the source of his difficulty.

For this reason, Jesus began interacting with this man in the only way that someone deaf could understand. Every action communicated something important as Jesus physically removed him from a paralyzing judgemental environment. In his identification with this man's pain, the text tells us that Jesus **“sighed.”**<sup>12</sup>

This sigh is the realm where a spiritual “Ephphatha,” which means “to be completely opened,”<sup>13</sup> happens. The grammar in the original text indicates the imperative case and is a picture of salvation, where God’s kingdom breaks through the darkness of this world with commanding authority. It opens prison doors and sets the captives free.

Consequently, those healed in our Gospel today vigorously proclaimed, ***“He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”***<sup>14</sup> Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>12</sup> Mark 7:34

<sup>13</sup> Strong’s Concordance, #1272 dianoigó which means “to open up completely”

<sup>14</sup> Mark 7:37