

The Unexpected Great Faith

Matthew 15:21–28

March 8, 2026 — New Baptist Church
Pastor Trent Eastman

Learning from the Best

Who do you learn from when you want to become really good at something? The answer is simple: you learn from the best. If you want to learn basketball, you watch the best players. If you want to learn music, you study under a master musician. If you want to learn wood carpentry, you watch a lot of YouTube videos. The principle is the same in every field: if you want to learn how to do something well, you find someone who does it well and you study them.

Now apply that to faith. If you want to learn what great faith looks like, who do you study?

There are many people in Scripture described as having faith — Hebrews 11 gives us what we might call the hall of fame of faith, a whole gallery of men and women who trusted God at great cost. But in all of Scripture, there is only one person whom Jesus describes using the Greek word *mega* — which means exactly what it sounds like: huge, of great magnitude, abundant, extreme, over and above. There are other examples of remarkable faith in the Gospels — the Roman Centurion, the woman who touches the corner of Jesus' cloak, the blind man who cries out to him — and Jesus praises each of them. But only one person in all of Scripture receives this particular commendation from the lips of Jesus himself.

So if you want to learn what great faith looks like, you turn to our passage — Matthew 15:21–28 — and you study the person Jesus describes as having great faith. That is what we are going to do today.

Where Jesus Went — and Why It Matters

In this season between Christmas and Easter, we have returned to our study of the book of Matthew. In terms of the timeline of Jesus' earthly ministry, roughly two and a half years have passed since his public ministry began. He has risen dramatically in popularity, but after the feeding of the five thousand — and the crowds' attempt to make him king by force — Jesus begins pulling back from the center of things. He is spending more concentrated time with the

disciples, and the crowds begin to shrink. Already at the end of chapter 14, we saw Jesus go to Gennesaret, on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, in Gentile territory, where he healed people. In chapter 16, we will read of Jesus traveling north to the district of Caesarea Philippi, another pagan and non-Jewish region. But in our passage today, Jesus goes west — all the way to the Mediterranean coast — to a region that had always been the home of Israel's most ancient enemies: the land of Tyre and Sidon.

The ancient name for this region and its people — the name that predates the Babylonian exile, that predates even the Assyrian empire — was Canaan. These were the Canaanites: the people whose sin had grown so great that God could no longer withhold judgment, the very people Israel was commanded to drive out before them when they entered the Promised Land under Joshua. Their religious practices were among the most morally depraved in the ancient world — child sacrifice to Molech, cult prostitution in the temples of Baal and Asherah, divination and sorcery woven into the fabric of daily life. Leviticus 18 describes them as a people whose very land had vomited them out under the weight of their abominations. And when Joshua led Israel into Canaan, this coastal strip — the region of Tyre and Sidon — was one of the few places Israel never fully conquered.

Over the centuries, the people of this coastland evolved into what the wider ancient world would know as the Phoenicians: one of the great maritime trading civilizations of antiquity, flourishing from roughly 1200 BC through the Hellenistic period, wealthy and powerful and perpetually dangerous to Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon posed some of the gravest threats not only to Israel's security but to the line of David itself.

It was from Sidon that Jezebel came — daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians — when she was given in marriage to King Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 16:31). Her influence turned an entire nation away from God and the covenant he had made with Israel, a spiritual catastrophe that contributed to the ultimate collapse of the Northern Kingdom. And Jezebel's daughter Athaliah was given in marriage to Jehoram, the crown prince of Judah (2 Kings 8:16–18). When Jehoram took the throne, he slaughtered all his brothers. And when their son died, Athaliah seized power for herself and attempted to exterminate every remaining descendant of David — including her own grandchildren. Only one infant survived: the child Joash, hidden by his aunt Jehosheba in the temple for six years (2 Kings 11:1–3), the line of David preserved by a thread.

Even beyond these dynastic threats, the prophets indicted Tyre and Sidon for plundering Jerusalem's treasures and selling the people of Judah into slavery to the Greeks (Joel 3:4–6). They were part of the coalition that sought to wipe Judah off the map in the days of King Ahaz.

Of all the places Jesus should not go, Tyre and Sidon would seem to be at the top of the list. Yet this is precisely where he withdraws — into the territory of Israel's most ancient and most dangerous enemies.

Why? As we are about to see, he went there because he had a divine appointment with a woman of great faith.

The Text

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:21–28

Notice how Matthew identifies this woman. In the Gospel of Mark, she is called a “Syro-phenician” — the technically correct term for a person from that region in that era. But Matthew reaches back deliberately and calls her a Canaanite. It is a word choice that carries enormous weight, like calling a person from modern Germany a Nazi. The label is loaded with history and moral revulsion. If anyone is beyond the reach of God’s grace, it is the Canaanites. They represent everything Israel was called to stand against. No faithful Jewish person would dare set foot in their territory. Yet here is Jesus. And here, in the most unlikely of places, is a Canaanite woman who believes in him.

When Jesus responds to her faith with the words, “*O woman, great is your faith!*” — the Greek is worth sitting with: *μεγάλη σου πίστις*. The word *mega* is placed first in the sentence, which in Greek is the position of emphasis. This is not a casual compliment. Jesus is stressing the magnitude of what he sees in her. *Great — great — is your faith.*

Compare this to what Jesus said earlier in Matthew about the Roman Centurion — also a Gentile, also an outsider: “*Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith*” (8:10). And now Jesus is not in Israel. He is in Tyre and Sidon. And here, beyond the borders of the covenant people, he finds a faith even greater.

If you were to ask an average Jewish person of that day which was worse — a Roman Centurion or a Canaanite woman — they would have been hard pressed to choose. Both

represented the bottom of the social and religious hierarchy in the Jewish imagination. Yet these are the only two people in the entire Gospel of Matthew whom Jesus singles out for extraordinary commendation.

And meanwhile, those who should have had faith — those within Israel who had every advantage — largely rejected him. The scribes accused Jesus of blasphemy when he forgave sins (Matthew 9:3). The Pharisees claimed he cast out demons by the power of the prince of demons (9:34). The cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum — where he performed his greatest miracles — refused to repent (11:20–24). Even the people of Nazareth, the town where he grew up, rejected him (13:53–58). All of these people — the scribes, the Pharisees, the religious leaders from Jerusalem, the townspeople of Nazareth and Capernaum — considered themselves clean, chosen, holy, infinitely superior to a Canaanite woman. Yet it is the Canaanite woman whom Jesus holds up as the example of great faith.

This raises the essential question: What makes her faith great? We need to study her, because if this is what great faith looks like, I want to have faith like that.

The Foundations of Faith

Before we look at how she trusts, we need to understand what makes her faith *faith* at all.

Great faith begins with knowledge. This woman had clearly heard something about Jesus. Someone had shared good news about him — who he was, what he did, the power and mercy that accompanied him. And we can see that knowledge in how she approaches him. She doesn't come in ignorance or desperation alone. She calls him *Lord* and *Son of David*. She invokes the mercy of God. She knows something true about Jesus and about the God he represents.

But knowledge alone is not faith. Many people in Galilee had heard about Jesus. Some laughed. Some dismissed it. The news of Jesus fell on their hearts like seed on a hardened path. This woman was different — she heard and she *accepted* what she heard as true. That is belief: knowing something, and accepting what you know to be true.

And yet even belief is not quite faith. For faith to be faith, it must move. It must act. It must become trust — belief that is lived out in real behavior. This woman knew that Jesus healed people oppressed by demons. She believed that knowledge to be true. And so she put on her shoes and went looking for him. She acted on what she knew. In simple terms: knowledge plus acceptance equals belief; acceptance plus action equals trust; and belief together with trust equals faith.

It is that faith — that trust, alive and moving — that brings her to Jesus. And what we find when she gets there is one of the most striking portraits of what trust actually looks like in someone with great faith.

What Great Faith Looks Like: Five Marks of Trust

First, trust is persistent — not easily discouraged.

This woman was never told no. But everything said to her by the disciples and by Jesus functioned as a barrier, a word of discouragement, a reason to give up. Three times she was pushed back. Not once did she retreat.

She comes to Jesus with her plea — her daughter is severely oppressed by a demon — and Jesus does not answer her a word. Silence. What does she do with silence? She stays put. She does not go anywhere.

Then the disciples beg Jesus to send her away, and she is still standing there, still crying out. What does she do next? She stays put. She does not go anywhere.

And then Jesus says something that sounds like a no, though as we will see, it is not quite that: *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* What does she do then? Not only does she not leave — she does the exact opposite. She gets closer. *But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”*

Second, trust draws near to Jesus, especially when discouraged.

This is one of the most instructive moments in the entire passage. When discouragement comes — when silence comes, when the crowd pushes back, when even Jesus’ words seem to close a door — great faith does not turn and walk away. It moves closer. It falls at his feet. Whatever you are walking through, whatever silence or difficulty you are feeling in your own life of faith, the right response is not to give up and go home. It is to draw nearer.

Third, trust rests on the character and promises of God.

What gives this woman the capacity to persist through all of this? She tells us herself in the very first words she speaks to Jesus: *“Have mercy on me.”* She is not appealing to her own worthiness. She is not presenting credentials. She is appealing to the character of God — his mercy. She knows God to be merciful, and she believes that absolutely, and that conviction is the anchor that keeps her from drifting away when everything seems to be working against her.

This is what sustains her even when Jesus says something that, coming across into English, can feel like sandpaper on the ears: *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the*

dogs.” We should note that the word Jesus uses here is not the word for the large, aggressive street dogs of the ancient Near East. It is a diminutive — closer to what we would call *puppies*, the small household pets that lived under the table. And anyone who has ever watched a small child eat a meal knows exactly what Jesus is describing. I have a grandson. I have a dog. The dog has learned precisely where to sit at mealtimes — right next to the grandson — because that child will take a bite of something and hand the rest straight to the dog. It is not right. He gets in trouble. But the dog is always very well fed.

The picture Jesus is painting is clear: she has no covenant claim on him. There is no agreement, no contract, no relationship that gives her a right to anything he might offer. He was sent to those with whom God had entered into covenant, and she is not one of them. She has no standing.

And she does not argue with this. She knows it is true. But she also knows something else — that the God of Israel is a God whose grace and mercy overflow even to those outside the covenant. “*He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust*” (Matthew 5:45). It is that overflowing character of God — not any claim of her own — that she is trusting.

And so she responds accordingly: “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*” Your goodness, your mercy, your grace overflows into all of creation. It is that overflow, that abundance, that I am asking for.

Fourth, trust is fueled by grace, not by works or rights.

This woman had no rights. She had no works to present, no spiritual resume, no religious pedigree. She came with nothing. But she trusted in God’s great grace, and it is precisely that trust in his grace — not in anything she brought — that made her faith great.

We are no different. Like this Canaanite woman, we come to Jesus with empty hands. We have no ethnic privilege, no moral resume, no standing of our own. Great faith doesn’t rest on what we bring to the table — it rests entirely on who Jesus is and what he freely offers. Great faith is trusting that God’s grace is so abundant, so overflowing, that even the undeserving — even us — can approach his table with confidence.

Fifth, trust is outward-looking.

For whom was this woman’s faith exercised? Not for herself — for her daughter. Her trust in Jesus was intercessory from start to finish. “*Have mercy on me, O Lord*” — because her daughter’s suffering was her suffering. She came to Jesus not for her own sake but for the sake of someone she loved who could not come on her own.

When we trust God enough to bring others to him — our children, our spouses, our friends who don’t yet know Jesus — we are exercising the kind of faith Jesus calls great. Great faith

looks beyond our own immediate needs and intercedes for those who cannot come on their own.

The Gospel in the Story

You may be sitting here thinking: *This is a great story about a woman with great faith, but I'm not sure my faith looks anything like that. I'm not sure I could persist through silence and rejection the way she did.*

If that is where you are, I have good news for you.

This woman's story is not only a portrait of great faith — it is a picture of the gospel itself. She had no covenant rights, no ethnic privilege, no claim on Jesus whatsoever. She was an outsider, an ancient enemy, someone who by every historical and theological measure should have been beyond the reach of grace. But Jesus went to her. He traveled to the land of Israel's oldest enemies — deliberately, purposefully — to meet her. He had a divine appointment with someone who had no right to be in his presence.

That is your story. That is my story.

The Apostle Paul puts it plainly in Ephesians 2:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

We were all Canaanites. But praise God, Jesus did not stay in the safety of his own people. He came to us. He crossed the border. He went to the land of his enemies — this fallen, broken world — and he met us in our desperate need.

And just like this woman, we came with nothing. No righteousness of our own. No good works to present. No spiritual pedigree. Just empty hands and a desperate cry: *Lord, help me.*

And what did Jesus do? He did not turn us away. He did not say, “*Sorry — you are not part of the covenant.*” Instead, he *became* the covenant for us. He took our place. He bore our sin. He died the death we deserved so that we could receive the life he deserved. And now, by his blood, we have been brought near — adopted into the family and given full rights as children of God.

The cross is proof that God's grace overflows. The cross is proof that even the crumbs from the Master's table are more than enough to satisfy a sinner's deepest need. But here is the beautiful

thing: in Christ, we do not just get the crumbs. We get a seat at the table. We get the full inheritance. We get the Father himself.

The Challenge

The application this morning is clear: trust Jesus the way this woman did.

Trust him when you feel nothing is happening and all you hear is silence. Trust him — draw even closer to him — when you feel discouraged. Trust him because of who he is, because of his character and his promises, not because of anything you bring to him. And let that trust be outward-looking — intercede for others, bring them to Jesus in faith.

Great faith is not something you manufacture. It is something you receive when you see Jesus clearly. This woman saw his mercy, trusted his character, and came with nothing but need. That is all Jesus asks of you. Come to him. Draw near. Bring your empty hands, your struggling faith, your desperate prayers for the people you love. His grace is more than enough.