

What is faith? We hear about faith all the time. When you give to charity, you may choose to give to “faith-based” organizations, or you may like to watch “faith-based” movies. You may hear athletes or politicians say, “my faith is very important to me,” and we see bumper stickers that say, “Faith, family, and freedom.” Americans may certainly be less religious, but they certainly have faith... But what is that? Why should you have it? Who should you have faith in? Why does it matter? Today, Jesus answers all of those questions as he says, “Woman! You have great faith!”

A bit context: Jesus has just had a confrontation with the Pharisees who accused him of dishonoring the Old Testament Law of Moses because he and his disciples didn’t do the official ceremonial washing of hands before eating. Jesus points out to them that they were adding their own traditions to God’s Word, and that they shouldn’t be concerned about the dirt on their hands, but the dirt in their souls- their unbelief- that’s what makes you unclean before God!

Jesus then goes up north to the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, two prosperous port cities, and there they are approached by what Matthew calls, a “Canaanite” woman from the region. Remember, Matthew was a Jewish man, writing his Gospel for Jewish people, and the word “Canaanite” had some baggage. The Canaanites were Israel’s neighbors throughout the Old Testament, and they didn’t get along. They were usually at war, and the most famous Canaanite woman from Sidon or Tyre was the evil queen Jezebel. “Canaanite” had theological baggage as well. The Canaanites worshiped the fertility god Baal and goddess Asherah, which included self harm and temple prostitution. The Canaanites were also well-known for reaching out and speaking to spirits, a process which included a “medium” that would be possessed by the spirit and used like an instrument to say its message.

That is likely the spiritual background of this woman. And when she says that her daughter is “badly” possessed by a demon, she’s not being superstitious. The symptoms of the demon were likely incredibly violent, perhaps the girl was being thrown off her bed or into a fire, perhaps the demon took control of her to attack her mother or other people, or to attack the girl herself. Can you imagine this as a parent? To helplessly watch as you lose your little girl to a demon, so evil that he preys on children, and there is nothing you can do to help? But she knows someone who can. And that’s point number one:

Faith knows.

Look at her words: “Lord, Son of David.” We have no idea how she would have known, but she knew enough. She knew that the man in front of her was not simply a good teacher or a wise rabbi or a powerful prophet or miracle worker. She knew that he was the King of Creation. She knew that David was promised that a king would come from his line and rule forever. She’s openly saying that he is God and is therefore the creator of the demon destroying her daughter, and at the sound of his voice that demon will flee in terror never to come back again. She also knew that this God of power but also a God of mercy. A God who is kind and generous and compassionate and merciful. A God who saves. She knows that this man not only has the power to help her, but the will. Faith knows.

It may seem like common sense, but in order to have faith in God, you have to know who he is. You have to know that he is all powerful. You have to know that he is all loving. You have to know about him in order to know him. Interesting fact- the New Testament wasn't written yet, so this woman had everything she knew about Jesus from the Old Testament, either from reading or a preacher or a friend, and she may not have known everything, but she knew enough. This is why we study catechism and why Bible study needs to be a major part of our lives. How can you believe in a God you don't know anything about? You can say you trust him, you can say you love him but not know anything about him or at least an interest in learning more about him? Part of growing in your faith is growing in knowledge of the one in whom you put your faith. Our God is not simply a divine impersonal being that exists up in the clouds and says, "figure it out." He gives us the Scriptures to learn about him. That's what doctrine is- not just stuffy, boring, abstract information that you learn when you're a teenager: it's who God is and what he's like. Our faith isn't in some teaching or some idea, but in a real God who can be known, loved, trusted, and studied. In order to have faith, you have to know the person your faith is in. Faith knows.

But... You can know the Bible back and forth and still not have faith. The Pharisees knew their Old Testaments better than anyone and they didn't have faith. That is because faith isn't simply knowledge of facts. Faith doesn't just know, faith trusts.

Jesus doesn't even give the woman the dignity of an answer. Not a word. You'd think that the woman would get the hint and get lost, but she doesn't. Instead, she keeps it up, begging and begging to the point where the disciples actually tell Jesus, "just give her what she wants, she won't shut up." Jesus then responds to them, likely so that the woman can hear, "I was sent for the lost sheep of the House of Israel." In other words, "I didn't come for her." She then falls at his feet and cries, "Lord, help me."

Why? Why didn't she accept Jesus's "no?" Not only did she know enough about him to know that he is truly good and truly loving and truly able to save her daughter's life, but she trusted him, even when Jesus himself seemed to tell her the opposite. Why? Because she didn't only know about him, she trusted him. She trusted that he wasn't a liar. She trusted that he was truly good, even if it didn't seem like it. She trusted that Jesus wasn't just for some people, but for all people. Why? Because that's what the Scriptures say, and she knows that the Bible is Jesus' Word, and although he may not make sense, he isn't a liar.

Faith isn't simply knowing about God, but trusting him. Not a generic, "belief in something, belief in a higher power, belief that there is a 'god' out there," but in a real, historical, Jesus Christ who walked on this earth and was seen by real people who wrote down what he did and said. Faith is when you know and TRUST what he says and that he is not a liar, even if your circumstances tell you otherwise.

But that's not all. Faith knows who God is and what he says, faith trusts him and what he says, and faith surrenders to God and what he says. Let me explain.

Jesus then looks at her, and as if he weren't already insulting her, he takes a step further: "It is not right to take the children's bread and feed it to the dogs." Yes. He is calling her a dog. Some commentators try to soften this and say, "well, the Greek might be talking about a pet dog, not a stray dog." My response is this: who cares? He's calling her a dog, and he's saying not only did he not come specifically to help her, but that it is wrong for her to ask for his help, that she has no right to expect a thing from him. Her response, "Yes. You're right!" She isn't arguing with him, she's agreeing with him. She doesn't say, "No, I'm not a dog." She says, "yes, Lord. I am a dog. So don't give me the bread. Give me crumbs. I'll take crumbs. You are so good and so powerful that the crumbs from your table are better than anything anyone else can give me. I'll gladly be a dog if it means I can be near your table. I know I don't deserve your help. I know that I'm nothing. But I know that you are so good that you love me and want to help me, and you are so powerful that even a crumb of your power can save my daughter."

Faith surrenders. Faith doesn't say, "Yes Lord, I do deserve your help because I'm a good person, you should be lucky to have me," or, "Yes Lord, but I try my best to be a good person, so you should cut me some slack." Faith says, "Yes Lord, I am nothing. I don't deserve you or your help, love, or grace. But I'm going to ask for it anyway because I know, and I trust that you are good, even though I'm not."

That, according to Jesus, is great faith, big faith, literally in Greek, "mega-faith."

So, go and have great faith. Amen...

Just kidding. How do you get faith like that? You can't just decide to have it. You can't conjure it up by saying, "I need to have great faith." Great faith, the staggering humility and shocking confidence of that woman, can only happen when you have a great Savior.

You see, that very Jesus who healed the daughter willing gave up all his power, all his privilege, all his glory, and was willingly humiliated, beaten, stabbed, and executed like a criminal, and above all cut off from God the Father because that is what each and every one of us deserve because of every evil that we've committed. But because he did that, every ounce of Hell that we deserve is gone. What does that mean? The cross means that I deserve nothing, I have earned nothing, I am nothing, and at the same time, I am given everything, I can expect everything, I am everything to God and can be bold enough to hold him to his promises and expect him to love and cherish and accept me because of what Jesus has done. As you look at your life, all the ways you've screwed up and how depraved you are, and then see that Jesus was willing punished for all of it, that gives you faith. You know whom you trust, you trust him, and you gladly say, "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. Foul I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die," and know that he has done it in full. That is faith.

Here's an application: What was the difference between the Canaanite woman and the unbelieving pharisees? The difference is NOT that she was a good person and the Pharisees were not. Quite the opposite, the Pharisees were obsessed with being good people and doing good things, and the Canaanite woman, for all we know, could have led a really depraved life

before meeting Jesus. Yet she's the one who has faith, she's the one who is saved, not them. Why? Not because she deserves grace, but because she realizes how badly she needs it.

What's the difference between you, Christians who come to church, and all the people out there who don't have the faith we do. We are not better or more deserving of Jesus' love than anyone else. The difference is that our eyes have been opened as to how desperate we are. We don't go to church because we're good, but because we're evil and need to hear about Jesus' forgiveness. That should be the way we present ourselves to non-Christians. "We're not holier-than-thou, we're not better than you, we're broken, poor, beggars. We're sinners. We're dogs desperate for crumbs. But we found the master who gives us bread. Come with."

That's faith. Mega-faith. Amen.