

Prayer is an amazing and a wonderful thing. There's nothing in this world that's quite like prayer. Because through prayer, we talk to God. Through prayer, we find help for all of our troubles. As the hymn says: "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!"

But Christians, why, then, are we so often timid in our prayers? Why do we so often lack confidence? Because this lack of confidence leads us to sometimes not pray at all or to think that we are somehow annoying God when we pray for things. That God doesn't really want to listen to us, or that he's even going to be angry if we ask for this or that, and so we ask for so little, thinking that God has already said "no" to what we ask. Why are we so timid in our prayers? We should not be so timid. We should boldly and confidently come to the Lord who has promised to hear us and who can do all things. As the hymn says again: "We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer!"

But what does this boldness look like? What does this confidence look like? We see a picture of it in our reading for today. Because Jesus is on his way towards Tyre and Sidon. He's left behind Capernaum. He's headed to the northwest. And as he goes there, he is met by a Canaanite woman who lived in that area. She came out to meet him and cried out after him with a loud voice, verse 22: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." We might think that this is something ordinary. People are always asking Jesus to do something in the Gospels. But this is really quite amazing, Christians. It's amazing because this woman of all people is calling on Jesus. It's amazing because of who this woman is.

She is a Canaanite, we are told. By no means a part of Israel. She is an outsider. No one would expect this woman to know anything about Jesus, much less to believe in him. And being a Canaanite meant that she was part of a people who were pagans. In fact, among the worst in those days. And her people, because of it, were under a curse from God. Cursed by God because of their false religion and because of their evil practices. In fact, we're told in Genesis chapter 9: "Cursed be Canaan! A servant of servants shall he be to his brothers." Remember, Noah said that. Noah! Which means that this curse is more than three thousand years old by the time we get to our reading in the Gospel. But the main reason for this curse was because they so often led Israel astray. They led Israel to worship their false gods. Because whenever Israel went after false gods in the Old Testament, it was almost always Canaanite, whether it be Baal or Asherah or Ashteroth or whoever it was. And so God had cursed Canaan and prophesied judgment to come upon them. He never promised to them mercy. And the only reason why she is here today before Jesus is because Israel failed to fully complete the conquest in the days of Joshua. She is part of a people who stand under the clear judgment and wrath of God.

And more than this, Christians, she's from Tyre and Sidon, which means that she is a Phoenician. Phoenicians were a specific group of Canaanites who had spread themselves all throughout the Mediterranean. They had colonies at Carthage, even as far away as Spain, because they were well known in those days as traders and as merchants--and they were very good at it too. But as they spread out throughout the Mediterranean Sea, they took with them their evil practices. The Phoenicians, like most Canaanites, practiced child sacrifice, offering up their own children to their false gods, something which God completely and utterly condemns in the Scriptures. In fact, we're told, Deuteronomy 18: "There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering." A Phoenician practice. And as Deuteronomy goes on to say,

whoever does this is an abomination to the Lord. So for all these reasons, Christians, because this woman is a Canaanite, she has no reason to think that God would listen to her at all.

And yet here she is! Isn't that what's so amazing, Christians? She is different from all of her people, because she knows who Jesus is. She calls him Lord. She even calls him the Son of David. Those were things that even Israel in these days frequently did not see. And she made the effort to go out to him! She didn't wait for him to come to her. She went out and found him, asking him to heal her daughter and to drive out the demon who was possessing her. This woman means business. She is bold. She is confident in asking Jesus for these things.

But Jesus wants to make a point here, to teach us something about prayer, and so he says nothing. Why? Remember who this woman is, Christians. She's a Canaanite. She's a Phoenician. People who have been utterly condemned and judged by God. She is the least likely person to expect anything from the Lord. This is why Jesus later says, verse 24: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." No promises had ever been made to the Canaanites. No promise of mercy had ever come to them from the Lord. Jesus had been sent to fulfill the promises made to Israel. And even when she comes to him, falling down on her knees and begging him, "Lord, have mercy," Jesus tells her, verse 26: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Jesus calls her a dog, because she is an outsider, the lowest of the low. We hear this also in other places in the New Testament. Revelation 22 says: "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." So dogs here in Revelation are those who are outside the New Jerusalem, those who have no part in the city of God because of their evil works. The sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, they are all dogs. And Philippians 3 also says: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh." "Dogs," in other words, is another way of saying "evildoers," which the Canaanites certainly were, an abomination to the Lord. So Jesus is basically saying to her: "Are you not a Canaanite? What right do you have to ask anything of the Lord?"

But she doesn't back down. She says to him, verse 27: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She's not denying that she is a dog. She knows she has no right to ask anything from the Lord. But even the dogs, she says, have a place at the table-- even if it's only under it. Even the dogs will receive something from their master if they ask for it in faith. She is bold and confident in her prayer, because she knows who Jesus is. She keeps coming back to him again and again, knowing that God will help her. Even when it seems like God is against her, she keeps coming. And she's right. Jesus answers her prayer, and he heals her daughter. And in the process, he teaches us something about prayer too. He shows us what it means to be bold, what it means to pray confidently to the Lord. We see an example of that in this woman for today.

So why, then, Christians, are we so timid in prayer? Why do we so often lack confidence? This woman had everything going against her. She had no reason to think that God would listen to her at all. And yet she kept coming back again and again, even when it seemed like Jesus wanted nothing to do with her. She had no promise that she would be heard, and yet she still went. But we do, Christians! We do have a promise from the Lord that he will hear our prayers. Jesus says, John chapter 16: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you." And again, Jesus says, John 14: "If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."

And again, John 15: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Jesus tells us again and again that he will hear us when we pray, that God will answer us when we pray. Why, then, do we hesitate to come to the Lord in prayer? Is it because we think that we are unworthy, that God shouldn't give us anything? Was there anyone more unworthy than this woman? And yet she still came to him. Is it because we think that we're somehow bothering God, that God has already said "no" to the things that we are going to ask? But God said he will hear. God said he will answer. Why should we doubt and wonder? Listen again to what Jesus says, Christians. Matthew 7: "Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and the one who seeks, finds, and to the one who knocks, it will be opened." And again, Luke 18: "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?" No, God will not delay long. God will answer the cries of his people. "We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer!"

Therefore, Christians, be bold. Be confident in your prayers. Don't be timid. Don't give up even before you ask. Ask and keep asking, just like that Canaanite woman did. And as Jesus answered her prayers, he will also answer yours, because he promises to hear, and nothing is too hard for God. Ask and you will receive in Jesus' name.

Let us pray. Almighty God, who loves to hear the prayers of your people, cause us to draw near with confidence to your throne of grace, so that we may receive your mercy and find your grace to help us in every time of need. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son. Amen.