

Fight Back

Matthew 15:21-28 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² 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." ²³ 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." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 What did Jacob do when the Lord came to wrestle him? He fought back. Until daybreak. Jacob and this man whom Jacob would later learn was God in human flesh wrestled back and forth all night. And when God-man was losing, He dislocated Jacob's hip. But still Jacob refused to let God depart until receiving a blessing from Him. So the Lord renamed Jacob Israel, which means "He strives/persists with God." And when Jacob limped away, he was just grateful to have escaped with his life, having seen God face to face.

2 If that story wasn't seemingly odd enough, the story St. Matthew records in today's Gospel is even stranger. A Canaanite woman, not an Israelite, came to Jesus and asked, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." Jesus responded by, well, by not responding. He ignored her. So His disciples interceded because she was crying out behind them. He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she persisted, kneeling before him, and asked, "Lord, help me." First Jesus ignored her; then he said He wasn't sent to her because she was a foreigner. Finally He dealt the worst blow of all: He called her a dog. "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she was undeterred, "Call me a dog, fine. But dogs still get to eat crumbs."

3 Last week, the readings shed light on one of your enemies: the devil. So what do you do when it doesn't seem to be the devil who is your enemy? What do you do when it seems like God is your enemy? Is this the same Lord in today's Gospel reading who promised in St. John's Gospel that "whatever you ask in my name, this I will do"? So why doesn't He seem to care about this woman's prayer? How does God answer prayer? Well, He ignored the woman. Then He dismissed her from His chosen people. Finally He called her a dog. Does He answer your prayers the same way?

4 Jacob knew how the outcome of his wrestling match should've ended. One minute he's winning, the next he's just happy to have escaped with his life. And instead, God had blessed him. When a sinner presumes to wrestle God, he can't expect God to be beaten so easily. And so when the Canaanite woman wrestled with Jesus, she already knew the rightful outcome. The first words out of her mouth were words of repentance. "Have mercy on me, Son of David." She confessed that He is the Divine Son of David, the Messiah for Israel, and in so doing, she knew she was no Israelite. And yet she asked anyway, not because of her rightful claim to God, but because she knew this God to be merciful. "Have mercy on me," are the words of repentance from David after confronted with the truth of his sin.

5 And when Jesus was silent after her first cry, when he tried to send her away for not having the right blood type, she persisted. She called on the promise of God to be merciful, to have mercy on those who repent. Now she calls on God, "Lord, help me." "I lift up my eyes to the hills," says the psalmist. "From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth." (Ps 122:1-2) The Lord promised His people, "fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isa 41:10). Relying on the Lord's promises to His people, the Canaanite woman asks for mercy and help. She fought back, not with her own words, but with the Lord's promises.

6 Not even calling her a dog could deter the woman from taking hold of the promises of the Lord. She already knew she was a dog, a Canaanite, and—worse—a sinner. But this Lord whom she had approached by clinging to His promises came not for the righteous. In His words, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but the sick...I came not to call the righteous but sinners.” (Mt. 9:12-13) He came not for the sheep who aren't lost; He came for lost sheep. And, yes, even for dogs, even for Gentile dogs.

7 God in human flesh did not leave Jacob without blessing him. Jacob fought back with God's promise to bless the descendants of Abraham. God in human flesh did not leave the Canaanite woman without having mercy on her, without helping her, without healing her daughter. She fought back with the Lord's promise to have mercy on sinners, to help the helpless. So may you. When the devil tricks you into thinking that the Lord is your enemy, repent. When you grow weary of praying because your prayers seem to go unanswered, repent. Repent and fight back against the devil's trickery with the Lord's promises to you.

8 God is not your enemy. Want proof? God took on human flesh so that He would no longer be your enemy. God allowed himself to be pinned by Jacob in the wrestling match; He allowed Himself to be caught by the woman; and He allowed himself to be nailed to the cross. There, on the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for sin with His precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. Sinners who are by their very nature rebellious against God will find in Him an enemy, but not you, beloved. Your Lord has given to you the gift of faith. To no one else in the Gospels does Jesus give this compliment: “Great is your faith.” But this same great faith He has given to you through the waters of Holy Baptism and the proclamation of His Word.

9 The woman, dog though she was because of her sin, would feast on far better than crumbs. All she wanted were crumbs of Jesus, but she got the whole feast. By

faith, she is a true Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and heir to the blessing given to Jacob. By the same faith, you are a true Israelite, a member of God's holy Church, one of His chosen people. And though your sin would have left you as a despised dog, your Lord gives you what dogs could never deserve. You will feast on far better than crumbs. You will eat the very Body and Blood of Him who died to give you forgiveness of sins. In this very meal, your Lord forgives your sins. And feast though this is, the Body and Blood of Jesus in, with, and under bread and wine are only crumbs compared with the feast that awaits you at His return.

10 Learn from this Canaanite woman how to pray. She caught Jesus in His promises because He delights to let Himself be caught like this. God has placed His name upon you. With that name, He has promised you forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation. With that name, He has claimed you as His own. You have an eternal inheritance. Of course you could never deserve it, but He has promised and delivered it through His name. And he cannot wriggle out of His name. He delights to be caught in His promises. He delights to have mercy on you. He delights to help you. For these treasures, you may ask, expecting to receive from the Lord what He has promised you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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