

SERMON - The Healing of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter, Sunday, February 3, 2019

The account we heard today of the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter, can also be found in Mark 7:24-30. We find our Savior today in the region of Tyre and Sidon. These are Gentile cities in Phoenicia, north of Palestine. According to Genesis 10:15, Sidon was the first-born son of Canaan, thus the woman is a "Canaanite." St. Mark's Gospel refers to her more proximate geographical background as "Syrophoenecian" (Mark 7:26). Being Gentile in population, these cities are contemptible to the Jews. The children of Israel hold first claim, as their inherited right, to the blessings of the New Covenant. Nonetheless, our Savior makes it clear that no one shall inherit the Kingdom of God simply as a birthright. Jew or non-Jew, slave or free, Roman or Greek, everyone will stand naked and alone before the Lord on Judgement Day to give an accounting of our life. St. John Chrysostom comments that the Canaanite woman represents all repentant sinners. Recognizing their weakness and unworthiness before God, they lean wholly on God's mercy and beg for forgiveness and God's blessings. The Canaanite woman is an example to all of us of how we should approach God. No one should ever make demands of God or to consider that the blessings of God are something that we are entitled to. This goes for all of the blessings and Mysteries in the Holy Church as well. None of us is entitled or have a right to anything. The blessings of God and the Holy Mysteries in the Church should be approached with humility and repentance, acknowledging our sins and unworthiness before God, and begging God for His mercy. Notice carefully how the Canaanite woman approaches the Lord. First she falls down at the Lord's feet. By her physical posture she demonstrates her internal attitude of humility and repentance. She then verbally begs the Lord for mercy. During the Divine services we pray without ceasing "Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy." We don't demand during our prayer "Give me, give me, give me." This may sound silly to our ears. However, the reality is that whenever pride rears its ugly head within us, whenever we have an attitude of entitlement, we are in essence saying exactly that, "Give me, give me, give me, you must, you must, you must, I'm entitled, I'm entitled, I'm entitled." Jesus has been preaching in parables, and in keeping with this methodology, He speaks in a parable when He answers the Canaanite woman saying, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and to throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26). Jesus says this in order to make a vivid and clear example of this woman's faith to all of us and for all times of what true faith is, and how we should approach the Lord. Even our Savior's disciples had difficulty comprehending the parables of Jesus. The Canaanite woman, however, has no problem understanding this parable spoken by our Savior. Most of us would probably take offense and feel insulted if we were to ask for something and not only be rejected, but to add insult to injury, to be compared to a dog. This woman, in her deep faith and humility, takes no offense at these words spoken by our Savior. Instead she perseveres by answering, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 15:27).

I hope that this real event in the life of our Savior, and His attempt to use it to teach us about the spiritual life, will help us to understand what should be the inner disposition of our souls. Our Savior said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). I attended a Diocesan Assembly where a delegate told us in the course of her report, "I am a convert. And I have never seen any church where people fight so much like in the Orthodox Church." This is a very chilling and sad statement, and a testament by one member of our church and her observations of how poorly a job we are doing following in the footsteps of our Savior and living the life in Christ. In speaking about the end times, our Savior said: "...most men's hearts will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). Although Jesus was specifically speaking about the destruction of the Temple and the end of Temple Judaism which occurred in 70 AD, His words also contain truths which can be applied to the eventual end of the world. Brothers and sisters, when we speak with each other, we should speak with love and kindness. We should never be accusatory or make our listener feel like he or she is on trial. Hopefully, we

are all here because we love Christ and we want to follow the Word of God of the Gospel and the New Covenant. The way we speak to each other and treat each other is a reflection of why we are here and indicative of whether or not we are here for the right reasons. Dr. Philip Mamalakis, in his marriage preparation course, teaches that couples should avoid using the word “you” when working on a problem or disagreement. We should not focus on the person or on people, but we should focus only on the issue itself. Using “You” language is accusatory and should be avoided. It makes the listener feel defensive, and the discussion, instead of being focused on solving the problem, instead wastes valuable time and energy on trying to affix blame, which solves nothing. This drives wedges between people, and instead of uniting people, creates an atmosphere of animosity and hatred. Visitors to our church are not ignorant. Whether a visitor knows the Word of God or not, a visitor’s judgement of our church will be based on how not only they are treated, but their observations of how we treat one another. They will listen to what we say and how we say it. They will observe what we do. Only if our words and actions reflect love, kindness and forgiveness will the visitor hopefully consider returning to worship with us again. If, however, the atmosphere is filled with coldness, unkindness and hostility, then no matter who or what we claim to be, you can be certain that the visitor will never return again. If we ask someone a question, and that person feels like they are on trial because the way they are being asked is accusatory, than you can be sure that the question is not being asked with a good and pure intention, and the heart of the person asking the question is not in the right place. May God help all of us, brothers and sisters, to be like the Canaanite woman. May we have humility and self-reproach in our hearts. May we choose our words carefully and may our motivation always be out of love and goodness. Let us not judge others, but judge ourselves as the worst of sinners. May all pride be banished from our hearts, and may we instead have a deep sense of our own unworthiness before the Lord. Just before we pray the creed during the Divine Liturgy, let us not be left out as hypocrites, but may we have a right spirit in our hearts when the priest or deacon intones: “Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess.” Amen!