

Matthew 12:18

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[0 : 00] This morning we were brought face to face, as it were, in God's Word, in the Bible, with a portrait of Jesus, of God's chosen servant of the promised Messiah.

A portrait of the one who was empowered to fulfill God's great mission of proclaiming and securing justice for the nations, the righting of all wrongs, and the establishment of His just and perfect rule. And one aspect of that portrait concerns the certain outcome of the servant's mission. And maybe we would do well just to read the words of that portrait to remind ourselves of them.

This is not our text, but the final sentence in this portrait speaks of the certain outcome that leads us in to what we want to say concerning the passage that we've already read.

Let's remind ourselves of the words of that portrait in Matthew chapter 12 from verse 18. Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight.

[1 : 26] I will put my spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out. No one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.

And then very especially the certain outcome. In his name, the nations will put their hope. The word that we have there translated nations is a word that can also be translated, and sometimes is, as Gentiles.

What the appropriate word is really is just a function of the context in which the word is found. Now, we noticed this morning that this outcome, the nations putting their trust in him, reminds us that the work or the mission of the servant is an ongoing work.

There is a sense in which when Jesus ascended into heaven, he was leaving a work still undone, or certainly a work still unfinished.

But of course, he ascended into heaven still fully committed to continuing the work to its ultimate, inevitable, and successful conclusion.

[2 : 53] And of course, Jesus continues to work in the mission commended to him by the Father, where there's a striking, interesting, intriguing evidence of that, or demonstration of that, in the way in which Luke opens the book of Acts.

I think something we've noted at some point in the past, where he makes reference to his gospel, the gospel of Luke, and he describes it as the book where he spoke of how Jesus began to work, and the significance of that verb, that he sees his gospel as the beginning of the work of the Messiah.

And now, in the book that he is penning, in the book of Acts, we have a continuation of the work of Jesus, in a different way, from heaven, by his Spirit, through his people.

But Jesus continuing to work. So, when Jesus ascended into heaven, there was a sense, a very real sense, in which the work he had been given was still an unfinished work.

And a very obvious aspect or element of that concerns the nations, and this outcome that is identified, that the nations would put their hope in him.

[4 : 15] And we know that in Jesus' ministry, largely limited to Galilee, the occasional forays beyond, as on the occasion that we're going to be looking at this evening, to Jerusalem as well on occasion, we see little of the nations putting their hope in his name.

There are, of course, examples that we are given throughout the gospels. We're able to identify some Gentiles trusting in Jesus, placing their hope in Jesus, and these limited few serving as the first fruits of a great harvest that was yet to come.

And this evening, I want us to think about one such Gentile, one representative of the nations whose hope rested on Jesus. And if I had to give the sermon a title, I would paraphrase the words of Isaiah, and then reiterated by Matthew, at the very end of that portrait, rather than saying, in his

name the nations will put their hope, let's think of what we want to think about this evening along these lines.

In his name a Canaanite woman will put her trust. In his name, in the name of Jesus, in the person of Jesus, a Canaanite woman will put her trust.

And of this speaks our passage in Matthew chapter 15. So let's think about this woman using the theme of hope and order what we want to say around this theme.

[5 : 58] And so let's explore different aspects of this woman's hope. And as we do, I hope, I trust, that this will serve two practical purposes for us.

First of all, that it would serve as an encouragement to you to increasingly put your hope in Jesus. This woman would serve as a helpful example and prod and encouragement in your own hope and trust in the Lord.

But also, and in a sense, perhaps even more so, that it would challenge you to encourage others, even, maybe especially, the most unlikely to put their hope in Jesus.

We're going to read, and we're going to consider a woman who many would have thought was a very unlikely candidate to put her hope in Jesus, and yet she did. And she was rewarded, and that that would prod us and encourage us to encourage others to do likewise.

Well, let's think then of some of the aspects of this woman's hope. And the first one that I want to suggest is this, that her hope was a hope conceived in suffering.

[7 : 14] Notice what we are told about the circumstances of this woman in verse 22. We're told a Canaanite woman from the vicinity came to him, came to Jesus, crying out, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.

And then she tells of her condition, of her circumstances. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.

Mark describes the daughter. There's a parallel account in Mark's gospel in chapter 7. And Mark describes the daughter of the woman as her little daughter.

And just the picture that that paints of a small child adds even greater poignancy to her sorry and pitiable state.

This poor woman and her little daughter, are gravely and terribly oppressed by this demon.

[8 : 20] Now, it's very difficult for us to know exactly how this demon possession that she speaks of. And we've no reason to second guess what she says or to question the accuracy of her diagnosis.

It is her diagnosis. But we've no reason to doubt that her diagnosis is accurate. Nothing that would suggest otherwise. But even so, it's difficult for us to conceive or to imagine what that looked like.

How this demon possession found expression, if you wish. There are occasions in the Gospels where we see that demon possession was accompanied by some physical ailment of some kind.

We presume that that was the case here, though we are not told. What we do know is that it produced terrible suffering for this wee girl, this little daughter of this woman.

And as a mother, she shared in the anguish and the suffering and the pain of her daughter so terribly oppressed.

[9 : 29] What a terrible situation to be in for any mother, for any daughter, for any family. Yet these were her circumstances. But in God's gracious providence, it is the woman's suffering that awakens in her, we would imagine at first, a flickering hope in the one called Jesus.

We don't know the circumstances, how she heard of His arrival. In Mark, we're told of how Jesus entered into somebody's home, and it was in the context of being in a home that the woman appeared.

Was it her home? Was it a neighbor's home? We don't know. We don't know how she heard of Jesus, but she'd heard something. Indeed, from the dialogue, she had heard quite a lot about this man, Jesus.

And in her suffering, she fixes her eyes on Jesus as the one in whom her hope might rest. And I do wonder, would that have been the case had it not been for her suffering?

Would she have had reason to fix her eyes on Jesus had it not been for this terrible suffering that she was the victim of?

[10 : 47] Of course, in this, we see the power and the grace of God. You see, the devil is intent on destroying this poor wee girl and her mother and her family, but God intends it for good.

God uses the tragedy as a means of drawing the woman to Jesus. And nothing has changed. The millennia may have passed, but it is still true that God in His gracious providence uses terrible suffering, but with that good purpose and with that gracious end that it might be the means of drawing us and others to call out for help to Him.

And it's important for us as we would reach out in compassion, if we do and when we do, as we reach out in compassion to those who suffer, that we should do so from the pure motivation of love for those who suffer, but that we should do so also, not as an additional motivation, but as an accompanying sensitivity, that we should do so acknowledging the possibility that the very suffering being endured might awaken in those so suffering questions concerning God, concerning life, concerning meaning, and that these might be questions that draw such to a loving and gracious and tender God.

Her hope was conceived in suffering, but we can also say something else about this hope of the woman, that it was a hope that rests on mercy.

There in that same verse, in verse 22, we read that the Canaanite woman came to Him crying out, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.

[12:50] Have mercy on me. On what grounds does the woman seek the aid and attention of Jesus? Does the woman have anything to offer or anything to bring to the table that might in some way buy Jesus' attention?

Is there anything that she can bring to bargain some arrangement whereby Jesus might help her? Is she able to come on the recommendation of a friend that somehow that would open the door to Jesus and to His possible help?

Is there anything at all to recommend her to Jesus? Well, from all that we know of her and we know little of her, there is nothing that she can bring.

On the contrary, everything would seem to be stacked against her. She is, as described by Matthew, a Canaanite woman. Now, Mark is more precise in his description.

He speaks of her as a Syrophenician woman. And it's curious to just wonder why is it that Matthew opts to describe her as a Canaanite woman? It may be that just that word, that description of her as a Canaanite woman is intended to just emphasize that this was a woman who belonged to those who had ever been opposed to the people of God, the Canaanites.

[14:21] Even the pronouncing of the word conjures up the image of the enemies of God's people, those who had ever opposed God's people through history.

And this woman was a Canaanite. What hope could this woman have of receiving help from the Holy One of Israel? Everything seemed to be against her.

And so as she comes, her hope as she comes can rest only on mercy. And that is how she does come.

She rests on mercy alone. Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. I have no claim on you. I have nothing I can bring or offer to you.

I come resting on mercy alone. And in this, in this hope that she displays, resting on mercy, she does serve as an example for Jew and Gentile alike, for you and me.

[15:25] We come to Jesus resting on the grounds of His grace and mercy. And the good news is that Jesus, in common with His Father, delights in mercy.

If we are to come on any grounds, there are no better grounds to come than resting on mercy. So this hope is a hope that rests on mercy.

But another aspect that we can draw out as we read the passage is this, that this hope of this woman is a hope that keeps on crying out. Just drawing from the very text of the passage, a hope that keeps on crying out.

Let's notice verse 23. Jesus did not answer a word. She has come, she's calling out that He would have mercy on her, and what are we told? Jesus did not answer a word.

So His disciples came to Him and urged Him, send her away, for she keeps crying out after us. The disciples tell us that this was a woman who keeps crying out.

[16:33] Indeed, it seems that even the language that's used in verse 22 of her initial approach, crying out to Jesus. There too, the tense of the verb used suggests something that's continuing, directed to Jesus, directed to the disciples, crying out and crying out and crying out in the face of her great need.

And her cries were met with silence from Jesus. We might go further, certainly if we try and place ourselves in the shoes of this poor woman. Her cries were met with seeming disinterest on the part of Jesus.

Not a word was spoken by Jesus in response to these urgent cries of this poor woman. Her cries were met, it would seem, by irritation from the disciples.

They're fed up of this woman crying out again and again. It's awkward, it's annoying, it's irritating. They want to be rid of her. And yet, she will not retreat gracefully, even though it would seem that she has very little option other than to do so.

She just keeps on crying. She keeps crying out after us. say, the disciples. And I imagine as she did, all the more loudly and all the more desperately.

[18:08] Well, if we just pause there for a moment, we, as sons and daughters of God, as those who have been brought into the family of God, we enjoy far greater privilege of access to the Lord.

And how often do we give up when we perceive what we imagine to be a lack of an immediate and favorable response to our cry and our prayers.

But as we think of this hope that keeps on crying out, I want us to also just pause for a moment and just consider the response of Jesus and the disciples to this woman recorded for us in verses 23 and 24.

We know that in the face of them, she keeps on crying out, but how are we to understand the manner in which they do respond? We've read it, we've described it, but how do we understand it? Let's begin with the disciples. It would seem that the disciples were asking Jesus to grant the woman's request. Now that isn't what comes across in a simple reading of the text.

[19:17] When we read there in verse 23 that the disciples urged Jesus, send her away, for she keeps crying out after us, that would suggest that they have no interest in her being attended to, in her daughter being healed, but simply that she be dispatched.

However, it does appear that the verb used here translated send her away, it doesn't appear, it is a fact that on other occasions, and time doesn't allow us to explore the other occasions, but at least on another two occasions this verb is used in the sense of sending somebody away satisfied.

So it has the idea of send her away, but attend to her and send her away. And so it would seem what the disciples have in mind, well the way of getting rid of this woman, who is so bothersome, so irritating, is give her what she wants, give her what she wants and send her away.

Their concern for the woman, if indeed that is a correct reading of what is going on, isn't out of compassion fodder, not at any rate in any great measure, but the wish for a quiet and tranquil wife, and to be shot of this woman who keeps on crying out after them.

So that seems to be what's going on with regard to the disciples. If you are curious as to the possible meaning of that verb, send her away, at least two occasions where it's used in that more positive sense of sending somebody away satisfied in this same gospel in chapter 18 and verse 27.

[20:53] You can just take a mental note of that if you wish. And also in Luke chapter 2 and verse 29. The same verb is used, but with that sense of somebody being sent away satisfied.

And it's possible that that's what's going on here. But what about Jesus? What are we to make of Jesus' response? We're told there in verse 23, Jesus did not answer a word.

And then we have an explanation for that. In that sense, we have more help to understand Jesus because he himself gives an explanation for why he does not answer a word.

In verse 24, we read, he answered, and I think there we're to understand him answering or directing this explanation to the disciples, not to the woman. She may have been within earshot, we don't know, but I think the explanation that he's giving is to the disciples.

They're the ones who are saying, send her away, and he responds to them, explaining why he won't simply give her what she wants and be shot of her. Why won't he?

[22:01] That seems the obvious thing to do. This is the man who heals all who come to him. Why won't he do it for her? And he gives the explanation. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep.

of Israel. That's the reason why he is not giving her the attention that she seeks. Of course, this simply echoes what we know to be the order, the gospel order, if you wish.

We were reminded of it last Sunday evening, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. There is an order, there is a priority, there is a, you might even say, a preference, certainly a priority in God's economy, in God's ordering of his saving purposes to the Jew first.

And in the case of Jesus, certainly during his time on earth, he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. Indeed, that is what he commended his disciples to do as they went out on a mission, just in the same chapter, rather in the same gospel, in chapter 10, verses 5 and 6, when he sends out the twelve, what are the instructions that they are given?

Matthew 10, verse 5, these twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions, do not go among the Gentiles, or enter any town of the Samaritans, go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

[23 : 26] And so Jesus is being entirely consistent with his own instructions to the disciples. How could he tell the disciples one thing and then do something else himself? Yes, he had entered into a town of the Gentiles, the region of Tyre of Sidon, but not for ministry.

This was a retreat of some kind, and yet, of course, the need presents itself. But his initial response is to be consistent with his own mission that he's been commended, and indeed, the instructions he had given to his own disciples on this matter.

Jesus was a man of principle, and he would not lightly abandon the principle he himself had established. Hence the silence, and hence the explanation. But of course, as we'll see, there is a hierarchy of principles and of what comes first in the matter of Jesus' actions, but we'll come to that in a moment.

The woman, of course, continues to cry out, and we'll see how she does that in a very particular way in a moment. So let's move on to the next aspect of this hope of the woman. It's a hope that keeps on crying out, even in the face of great discouragement, but it's also a hope that looks for help.

It's very much connected, but I want to focus particularly on what she says, or what's recorded of what she says in verse 25. The woman came and knelt before him.

[24 : 51] She knelt before Jesus. Lord, help me, she said. Lord, help me. No grand speech was needed or expected.

She throws herself at his feet. At the feet of Jesus, she kneels before him. Despite the silence, despite the seeming disinterest, the woman makes one last effort to secure the help and mercy of Jesus, and she does so with words that are marked by their powerful simplicity.

Lord, help me. Lord, help me. An honest cry for help. That is all that she has left. That is all that she can muster, and that is all that is needed.

Lord, help me. And the Lord was moved by her cry. And the Lord still welcomes and is moved by hope that looks for help.

But then, let's move on and see one penultimate aspect of the hope of this woman. And we're describing it in this way, a hope that is cultivated in faith, or a hope that is fed, if you wish, by her faith.

[26 : 11] We could describe it in different ways. But let's stick with a hope that is cultivated in faith. And here I'm thinking really of everything that follows from verse 25 through to the end of the passage.

The passage ends with her being commended for her great faith. So we know that this woman was a woman of great faith. We have that on the authority of Jesus himself. But that faith is also pivotal in explaining and in understanding the hope that she has.

It is her faith that Jesus highlights and commends. What can we say about the nature of her faith, or in what does her faith consist? I don't think it's primarily about her persistence, commendable though that was.

Her humility in the manner in which she approaches Jesus, also commendable. But I think her faith is to be understood or to be described in this way.

It is her faith in the person of Jesus and her faith in the purposes of Jesus. Let's think of her faith in the person of Jesus. She clearly has some knowledge concerning the identity of Jesus.

[27 : 24] When she approached him on the first occasion, she uses a title of great significance, son of David. Her describing him as Lord, I don't think probably should be given great significance.

I imagine, I think it's reasonable to presume that the title there has been used as a title of respect, not anything beyond that. But son of David, that does carry greater significance, suggests some understanding as to his identity.

But her faith rests more in her convictions concerning the character of Jesus. She stubbornly clings to the conviction that he is able to heal, that he is merciful to heal, that he is willing to help.

It is this faith that drives her, that explains her persistence in crying out again and again and finally kneeling before him, help me Lord.

She has faith in the character of Jesus, in his willingness as well as his ability to help. But faith also in the purposes of Jesus.

[28 : 36] And this is most evident in the almost shocking dialogue between the woman and Jesus that is recorded by Matthew. What are we to make of the seeming harshness of Jesus' words?

When she cries out, Lord, help me, he replied, it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. And it's difficult to minimize just how shocking the language is, how harsh the language is, that the word dogs was an insult that Jews used of Gentiles.

That fact, in many ways, makes it worse. When we're conscious that this was a word commonly used. I don't know how commonly, but certainly it was a word that would be used to insult Gentiles. And we're surprised that Jesus would employ such language. Have we not been talking about this morning of how gentle and how tender he is in dealing with the bruised and the broken, and yet here what we find seemingly is very harsh.

How are we to understand this? Indeed, it does seem so harsh that many efforts have been made to soften the impact. Some have highlighted and laid great store on the fact that the actual word used here, the word translated dog, the Hebrew word that is used here is in a diminutive form.

[30 : 07] And we know in many languages the diminutive is used to make something a bit more affectionate. So if we were to think of a diminutive for dog in English, well, it would be doggy.

And so people say, ah, you see, it's not as harsh as it sounds. Jesus is using a nice word for dog. Now there's a problem, there's a linguistic problem, in that that works in the Greek, in which Matthew wrote his gospel, but it doesn't work in Aramaic, in which Jesus would have been speaking, because there is no such diminutive form in Aramaic.

So that leads us to a problem. Now if you want to get very clever, you might say, ah, but what happens is that Matthew sensed the tone in which Jesus was speaking, and so he seeks to reproduce that in the Greek that he employs.

Well, that may be. But I think it's clutching at straws somewhat to try and soften the blow of this harsh language. Others would point out, quite rightly, that what Jesus is doing is using picture language.

It's the language of a parable. But even so, it's still pretty harsh. Others suggest, and there's merit in this suggestion, it may be true, that what we need to recognize is that so much has to do with the manner in which you say something.

[31 : 31] That's true, isn't it, in conversation. You can say something that on the printed sheet may sound terribly harsh, but the manner in which you say it can change in huge measure the intention or the harshness of it.

So William Barclay, in speaking of this occasion, very keen to soften the impact of it, it seems, he suggests as follows.

We can be sure, we can be sure even, we can be sure that the smile on Jesus' face and compassion in his eyes rob the words of all insult and bitterness.

Well, can we be so sure? We can't be so sure. It may be, but we can't be sure. We're speculating. I think that probably rather than try and apologize for Jesus, we would do better to take the words at face value and recognize the final outcome rather than grumble at the process.

The final outcome really is what matters most of all, surely, for this poor woman. And the final outcome is that the woman's daughter was healed and that the woman, very much a broken reed, a smoldering wick, she was not bruised.

[32 : 45] She was not broken. She was not snuffed out. Even though she had to endure these difficult, harsh, if you wish, words of Jesus.

The harshness of the words, in fact, provided an opportunity for the depth of her faith to be tested and proved. But back to the woman and her response to Jesus' harsh words.

She accepts that what Jesus says is true. She acknowledges that the logic of it, the integrity of it is unquestionable. It's not right for the children's bread to be given to the dogs.

She says, that's true. It's not right. But then she says, well, what are the crumbs? And she's not just being clever. She is being clever, but she's not just being clever.

What this suggests is an insight in some measure into the purposes of Jesus towards the Gentiles. It's as if the woman is saying, you know, the dogs also deserve the crumbs.

[33 : 48] It's not simply an act of charity. The crumbs correspond to the household dog. The Gentiles, too, have a call on Jesus, and the woman's face rests on this conviction.

So her hope is cultivated by her faith. Her faith in the person of Jesus, in his character, but also in the purposes of Jesus that do extend beyond the Jews, to the Jew first, but also to the Gentile. But then finally, a hope that is rewarded with healing. The story has, of course, a very happy ending. Then Jesus answered, woman, you have great faith.

Your request is granted. And her daughter was healed from that very hour. The woman's hope is rewarded. Her faith is commended like none other in the Gospels.

Perhaps the only one who comes close is the centurion, also a Gentile. Her daughter is healed from the very hour of her cry. Can you imagine her journey home?

[34 : 57] You see, this is a healing at a distance. The daughter isn't there. Can you imagine her journey home? To confirm the welfare of her daughter. How she traveled as fast as her feet could carry her to find her daughter, to see how she was.

Matthew doesn't give us that, what could we say, touching detail, but Mark does. In Mark chapter 7 and in verse 30, we have this portrayal of this description of the woman hurrying home and what she discovers there.

In chapter 7 and in verse 30, we read the conclusion of the same incident. She went home and found her child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

What a wonderful discovery for this woman as she rushed home following these words of promise and assurance and commendation of Jesus.

Well, what can you take away from this miracle? Do we take away only how heartwarming it is to be witnesses to the healing power of Jesus, his concern for this woman, how he responds to her, how he in some ways overrides the order of events out of a concern for this woman and her plight?

[36 : 24] Well, as we suggested at the beginning, may this passage and this miracle that we've considered serve as both an encouragement to us to put our hope in Jesus and the one who will not disappoint, but also an encouragement to urge and encourage others, even and especially the most unlikely or those we might deem the most unlikely, that they too would place their hope in Jesus.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you.