

The childrens crumbs

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[0 : 00] In our house, we know all about children's crumbs. Now, you would expect to find children's crumbs on the kitchen floor. That's a reasonable place to find them. But over the years, children's crumbs have made guest appearances all over the house, in all the bedrooms, in the lounge, down the side of the couch. As for the car, you don't even want to go there. You could reconstruct a whole bakery from the crumbs that have made their way to our car. Now, for those of you with young children, I just want to warn you that children's crumbs become teenagers' crumbs, and teenagers' crumbs become grown-ups' crumbs. So, if you think it's ever going to end, think again. There is no end to crumbs. And today, we're going to be thinking about crumbs.

And we're going to do so, you might say, in tribute to a remarkable, unnamed mother we meet in our passage in Mark's Gospel there in chapter 7. And the manner that we're going to consider the passage is by posing four questions that all revolve around the very crumbs that this woman famously speaks of. Just remind ourselves of the words of this woman in verse 28 of our passage.

Yes, Lord, she replied, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. Four questions about these crumbs that this woman makes reference to. First of all, who is it that is scrambling for these crumbs? A strange thing to do, surely. So undignified, to scramble for crumbs. Well, who is it that is scrambling, begging for these crumbs?

But then also, to identify what these crumbs are, what they represent. What are the crumbs that the woman is begging for? Then there's a third question, one really that is at the heart of what Jesus says and at the heart of the woman's reply. Who are the crumbs for? Who is to receive these crumbs?

And then finally, are the crumbs enough? Are crumbs ever enough? Surely we want more than just crumbs. Well, that's the fourth question that we're going to pose and try and answer from the passage before us.

[2 : 46] And we'll start with the first question that allows us to meet this unnamed woman. And the question, I remind you, who is scrambling for the crumbs? We're not given the name of this woman. Mark gives us an account of this incident. Matthew does also. But both of them leave us in the dark as to what her name is. But even in the absence of a name, we do know or we can discover quite a lot about her. And I think what we can discover about her can be divided into two categories, connected for certain. But the first thing, we discover a great deal about her need, the need that she has. But also, we discover a great deal about her prospects, that is, the prospects of her need being met. Or in any case, we can draw inferences or conclusions about what her prospects appear to be. But let's begin with her need. And what is very clear, even the most cursory reading of these verses leads us to no other conclusion that this woman is in desperate need? Her daughter. Mark speaks of her little daughter. There is a tenderness, even in the language, that adds pathos and feeling to this woman's need. Her little daughter, her precious, deeply loved little daughter, is suffering terribly. Indeed, though Mark doesn't give us the very words of the woman as she approaches Jesus. Matthew does do so. And the words of this distraught woman are these words, my daughter is suffering terribly. Have mercy on me, my daughter is suffering terribly.

This poor woman is overcome not only by the pain of witnessing her precious wee girl suffer terribly. We're not told how this demon possession manifested itself, what pain, what hurt it brought.

But what we do know is that it was terrible suffering for the wee girl, but also for her mother as she looked on helplessly and powerously at her daughter. So suffer.

The pain of seeing her own daughter's pain. But she's also overcome by that sense of helplessness and despair.

It's one thing to see one we love dearly suffer. But if there's something we can do, that in a measure alleviates that pain. Something that can be done to bring relief. But in the case of this woman, that was not the case, there seemed to be nothing that could be done. The suffering was so great and the cause so deep that regardless of how much she would have wanted to help, the resources simply were not available to her. And so she is overcome by this sense of despair. What questions did she pose? We don't know, but we can imagine, why is this happening? Why my daughter, my wee daughter, why is she suffering so?

[6 : 16] What have I done to deserve this? Is it maybe my fault? Her need is very great. We thank God that our circumstances are different. I don't think there's anybody here who would be able to relate immediately to the circumstances of this woman in terms of the details of it. But as men and women, we too know of need, and perhaps some of you know of great need that you are facing, and that apparently there is no answer to. A need that goes beyond your own resources to respond to or satisfy, perhaps involving one you love dearly. Well, whatever your need is, whatever the need is of one you love, I would encourage you to observe carefully to whom this woman turns and how her need is met.

But as we identify the one who is scrambling for these crumbs, to use the very language of the woman in question, we can speak not only of her need, but we can also speculate, and it's more than speculation, we can conclude about the prospects that she faced regarding this need. What can we say about her prospects? What were the prospects? What were the prospects that her daughter would know liberation and healing, and that she would know peace for her soul? Well, the prospects were not great.

In the first instance, because of the gravity of her daughter's condition, that alone would have poured cold water and any flickering hope for a happy resolution. But perhaps even more crucially, the problem that this woman has is who she is. Her very identity stands as a huge obstacle, so it would seem, to any resolution. Who is this woman who approaches Jesus, a Jewish rabbi? Who is this woman who approaches Jesus for help? Well, we're told by Mark that she was a Syrophenician woman. She was a Greek.

Matthew describes her as a Canaanite woman, a Canaanite woman from Tyre in present-day Lebanon. Now, that description at face value, a Syrophenician woman from Tyre or a Canaanite woman from Tyre may seem innocent enough, but even in these few words, we discover how poor her prospects were.

Everything about her is wrong. She lives in the wrong place. Tyre was a famously pagan region. It's a curious thing that Jesus was there at all. It seems that he was looking to escape from the attention of the Pharisees and indeed of those who wished to follow him according to their own thinking, and Tyre would provide some relief. The introduction to the passage makes it clear that this was not a missionary journey. He was hiding from people, not looking for people, and maybe he felt this was a place where he could be anonymous and go under the radar.

[9 : 39] But Tyre was a famously pagan region. Going back in the history of the Old Testament, it is the home of Jezebel. We know just even that name is a name that almost symbolizes all that which is opposed to God. The Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary of the gospel writers, described the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon as our bitterest enemies. So this woman, if she's looking for help from a Jew, well, she lives in the wrong place. And of course, tied in with that, she was of the wrong nationality. Mark describes her as a Greek, probably because she was Greek-speaking. But ethnically, if we can use that language, she was a Canaanite. She was a Syrophenician woman. Again, what hope that a Jew would be favorably disposed to help one of that nationality, lived in the wrong place, was of the wrong nationality. And we have to say it, in the context of her day, she was of the wrong gender. She was a woman. Maybe a man could command the attention of this rabbi, but what hope for a woman? And we presume that she adhered to the wrong faith. She was, along with all her people, a pagan woman. And tragically, we have to add that she suffered from the wrong kind of problem.

Her daughter was demon-possessed. You don't get more unclean than that. Remember that this account is being recorded for us immediately after this discussion, this theological debate about being clean and unclean. Well, in the context of a Jewish mindset, there was nothing more unclean than demon possession. And this is the woman who was the mother of this demon-possessed daughter.

It's difficult to imagine somebody more unlikely, more unworthy, more unclean. Her prospects were not good. It's little wonder that Jesus' disciples urged the master to send her away. Again, Mark doesn't record that for us, but in the parallel passage in Matthew, that's what we read. The disciples, they go to Jesus, they go to Jesus and they say, send her away. Send her away. Send away this unclean woman, this Canaanite woman. Send her away. We have no time for her. We're not here to help that kind of people. Send her away. I wonder if you can relate to this woman in any way or in some measure.

In the face of your need, whatever that might be, all the odds seem to be stacked against you. Why would Jesus help you? Well, let's move on to think about the crumbs that she is scrambling for.

What are the crumbs that the woman begs for? Before we try and identify the crumbs or what they represent, let's just notice the manner of her begging. The verb that we find there in verse 26, she begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter is a verb that points to a persistent and continuing activity. She is begging and begging and begging, and she just won't go away.

[13 : 10] Of course, that's exactly the complaint, the affliction of the disciples, this woman who just won't go away. Again, in Matthew's gospel, they describe her as the one who keeps crying out after us. She's such a pain.

She just won't be quiet. She just won't shut up. Begging and begging and begging and begging. This is a woman who won't take no for an answer, and that in itself is a reflection of the depth of her love and a reflection of her grasp of the gravity of her daughter's condition. She simply will not take no for an answer. And it is a good thing to be conscious, to be aware of how grave our need is, for that in itself can lead us to be like this woman, a woman who would not take no for an answer.

Well, that's the manner of her begging, but our real concern in answering this question is, what is she begging for? What are the crumbs? Well, the crumbs, we might say, are what Jesus can provide.

And as we think of what Jesus can provide, we can perhaps distinguish between his power and his person. The woman is looking for Jesus to exercise his power and authority and liberate her daughter from her terrible suffering. That much is very clear. The woman, we can only presume, had heard about the miracles of Jesus that he had performed across the border in Galilee. Indeed, in Mark's gospel, we've already been told of those who had come from Tyre and Sidon, having heard of Jesus in chapter 3 and in verse 8, we read, when they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Edomia, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.

So we see a connection. People had come to see Jesus, and they'd gone home again, and they said, there's this guy Jesus, and he heals the sick, and he casts out demons. And this woman heard about this Jesus who could cast out demons. And so she sees Jesus as one who has power that can be exercised on her behalf. The crumbs that she's looking for is what Jesus can do for her.

[15 : 37] It's all she's looking for. All she needs, a few seconds of his time, one word of his power, just a few crumbs will be sufficient to solve her problem.

But though she doesn't realize it, she needs more than his power. This woman needs Jesus himself.

Why do you think Jesus represents what the woman needs as the children's bread? It's Jesus who brought in the picture of the bread. The woman goes with the flow very cleverly, but it's Jesus who speaks of the children's bread as being that which the woman needs. Why does he do that? Why does he use this picture? Surely as he uses this picture, he has in mind the truth that he would express more vividly on another occasion. In John's gospel in chapter 6, we read of what Jesus says concerning himself in verse 35 of that chapter. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. Jesus knows who he is. He knows that he is the bread of life, and when he speaks to this woman about the children's bread, surely he has in mind not only what he can provide, but who he is in himself. These are no ordinary crumbs that the woman is scrambling after. The crumbs that the woman begs for belong to and are part of the one who is the bread of life. Jesus doesn't just provide bread or crumbs for the needy. He is the bread of life who satisfies our deepest needs and longings.

This is what the bread is. This is what the crumbs are. Then that leads us to a third question. In many ways, it's at the heart of the short dialogue that is recorded for us between Jesus and the woman, and the question is this, who are the crumbs for? We've seen just a moment ago that the crumbs are what Jesus can provide, his power and his person. But who is Jesus for? Who is the bread of life for? Who can eat this bread? Who are the crumbs of life for? Well, Jesus provides an answer to that question, and it's a very difficult answer. We can't hide away from the fact that the answer he provides is, in a very real way, a very difficult answer. That doesn't mean that we can't understand it, but it is difficult. What does he say to this poor woman? We've already described her, attempted to describe her great need, the anguish that had overtaken her, and yet this is what Jesus says to her. Then in verse 27, just crumbs, that's all she wants, and this is what Jesus says, first, let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Now, by any measure, that is a difficult answer. In our politically correct age, Jesus would be condemned for being so harsh, so vulgar, so racist, and no doubt the adjectives could be multiplied.

It is a difficult thing that Jesus says, and he's addressing this question, who the crumbs are for, who the bread is for. The language is harsh. However, we try to soften the blow. The bottom line is that Jesus compares the woman and her daughter and her people to dogs. That's inescapable. That is what Jesus is doing. Now, it is the case that those who have studied this passage and the language that is used have acknowledged and recognized, and we draw from that scholarship, a truth concerning the language used that does, perhaps in a very real way, soften the blow. The word that is used here, the word that Jesus uses, and that the woman then also employs, then in verse 27 and 28, the word translated dogs.

[20 : 05] The word that is used there is a word that would not have been used for mongrel dogs that would have been roaming around, almost wild animals, but rather it's the word that would have been used of household pets. But there's more. The word that is used is used in a diminutive form. Indeed, some translations ought to reflect that and speak of little dogs. It's the New King James Version translates the word. It's one word, little dogs. That softens the blow somewhat, without doubt, and perhaps it was deliberate that Jesus used language that softened the blow. The other thing, of course, that's very difficult to know.

There's no way we can know. Is that words like this, the impact they have, the harshness of them is so often tied in with the tone of voice employed, the visual expression employed as you speak the words. They can revolutionize the actual impact, indeed even the meaning of the words to a certain extent. Now, of course, we don't know that. We're not privy to the tone of voice that Jesus used or the face, the smile or otherwise that there was as he spoke. But even if we do, and perhaps with good reason, acknowledge that the language, though harsh, is not perhaps as harsh as it appears, the bottom line remains that Jesus compares this woman, her daughter, her daughter, and her people to dogs. That is inescapable. And that maybe allows us to just remind ourselves or identify the different elements in this mini-parable and what they represent or who they represent. There are three elements in this mini-parable. There are the children.

Jesus speaks of the children, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Children, bread, and dogs. What they represent is clear. The children are the Jews. The bread is the gospel. It is what Jesus can provide. And the dogs are the Gentiles. I think that is a perfectly reasonable understanding of this parable. And the Bible. And the Bible. And the Bible. And the message is clear enough.

And Jesus states it explicitly in the account that Matthew records of this incident. Jesus said there, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. And that declaration of Jesus further confirms how we are understanding this little parable that He employs. Now, if that's the case, if Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, if it's the Jews who are the children and the Gentiles are the dogs, then is there no hope for this woman? Is there no hope for us? We, after all, are also Gentiles. Well, there is, even in the words of Jesus, there is one word, one very critical word, that introduces a ray of hope, more than a ray of hope, provides a foundation for hope. And it's the very first word of verse 27.

Because notice what Jesus says. He says, first, let the children eat all they want. First. We know what that means. He's not saying that there's no bread for this woman. He's not saying that there's no bread for the Gentiles. He's saying, first, the Jews are to eat, and then the Gentiles.

[24 : 05] And we know that is a gospel principle. We know that is a divinely ordered priority. It's not for us to quibble whether we think it's the way it should be or not. That is what God has determined to the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles. And that's what Jesus is saying. First, the children. But there will be bread sufficient for others. There will be bread sufficient for those who will be brought in from the outside. First, let the children eat. Jesus is not saying that there's nothing for this woman.

He's simply acknowledging this divinely ordered priority that had been established so clearly from the Old Testament. Let's just remind ourselves of something that the prophet Isaiah says concerning the Messiah and the mission of Messiah. In chapter 49, in verse 6, we read, Is it too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept? I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. The order is clear. Jesus comes for the lost sheep of Israel to bring them back to the back to the Father, but He comes also in due course to extend the invitation to the nations of the world. And this Syro-Phoenician woman is a illustration of that ultimate purpose and intention.

Who is the bread for? Who are the crumbs for? They're for the Jews, yes, but also for the Gentiles.

But then in addition to Jesus' difficult answer, we have the woman's remarkable reply. And we can identify different characteristics of her reply. Perhaps we could multiply them, but let me just mention three that I find in what she says. Three characteristics of her reply. Let's just read what her reply is. Verse 28, she replies to Jesus, yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. I think we can see that reply as being, first of all, a very humble reply, but it's also a very insightful reply. We might also say it's a very smart reply, given her objective, what it is she's trying to secure. Let's think of these three characteristics very fleetingly. Well, it's certainly humble. She doesn't protest at being compared to a dog. She doesn't say, who do you think you are calling me a dog? I'm going home. I didn't come here to be insulted. No, she doesn't protest. She is very conscious of her own unworthiness. She falls prostrate at his feet. She begs for mercy. She comes to Jesus, not resting on her own merit, but resting on the grace and goodness of the one that she pleads with. She acknowledges that she's not worthy of a place at the table with the children, but the crumbs, surely the crumbs. Just give me the crumbs, and that will suffice. This is a humble woman coming humbly to the Master. But she's not just humble, she is insightful. Now, just listen to this. This is a remarkable thing. This woman, we don't even know her name, this Syro-Phoenician woman who lived in the wrong place, who was of the wrong nationality, who believed the wrong things, who was of the wrong gender. This woman is the first person in Mark's gospel to get a parable. The very first. Throughout the gospel, thus far, the religious leaders never got the parables. The disciples didn't get the parables. But this woman, she gets it.

She knows exactly what Jesus is saying. She knows who the children are. She knows what the bread is. She knows who the dogs are. She gets it. This is remarkable insight, especially as we contrast it with what we've just been told about the disciples in this same chapter. In verse 17 of the same chapter, we notice this last week, after he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciple asked him about this parable. And what does Jesus say to his disciples? Are you so dull? You don't get it. But this woman, she does get it. I find this not only remarkable, but very encouraging and challenging for us today. We live in an increasingly biblical illiterate age. Most of the people around about us haven't a clue about the Bible or the gospel. You see this in quiz programs. I don't know if you've noticed, sometimes in quiz programs, there'll be the occasional Bible question. You know, who was Adam married to? What's the first book of the New Testament? Standard answer is, haven't a clue.

[29 : 18] Have you noticed that in these quiz programs? Even what we would see with the most basic general knowledge about the Bible, regardless of any commitment to the Bible, ignorance. And sometimes we think, well, that's a terrible place to be. That's a terrible place to be if we want to share the gospel with others and they haven't a clue. And I read this and I say, well, this is full of hope because here's a woman who didn't have a clue and yet she got it. And why did she get it? Because the Holy Spirit of God enabled her to get it. And so when we go out with the good news of the gospel, we mustn't think, oh, people will never understand. It's a losing battle. They haven't a clue. We haven't got any common ground to build upon. No, here's a woman. And she gets it so much more than the religious leaders steeped in the Old Testament, steeped in the Word of God. She gets it better than the disciples who had walked with Jesus. And so as we go out, let us go out in that confidence that as this woman got it. So today, many as the Spirit accompanies our timorous and often inadequate words, they too will hear and understand and believe and respond. Humble, insightful, but this woman is a smart woman. In all her humility, she's jousting with Jesus. She may be a dog or Jesus may compare her to a dog and unto a complementary comparison. But she is a dog that won't let the bone go until she gets what she needs. And of course, the bottom line in all of this, in the words of the woman and what they reveal about her, the bottom line is that in her own way and on the basis of the knowledge that she has, she trusts in Jesus to do the right thing. She believes that the one she is pleading with is both able and willing to meet her need and deliver her daughter from her terrible suffering.

But one final question concerning the passage. These crumbs that she's scrambling for, are they enough? Well, of course, in the account we discover that they were enough because her daughter is healed.

Jesus responds to her reply. Then he told her, for such a reply, humble, insightful, smart, you may go. The demon has left your daughter. The crumbs are enough. But is that all the woman gets?

Ultimately, that's all she was looking for. Crumbs would be enough. But is that all that she gets? Yes. We've already identified the bread that the crumbs come from as Jesus himself and all that he can provide. And having so identified the bread, we can only conclude that Jesus is not content with only giving this woman crumbs. Yes, even the crumbs are better by far than any banquet the world could provide. Even the crumbs satisfy. But there's more than crumbs. Never was it the intention of Jesus to only give the woman, or anybody else for that matter, just crumbs. Let's remind ourselves of what Jesus says. It's the woman who introduces the idea of crumbs, not Jesus. What does Jesus say? Jesus says in verse 27, first let the children eat all they want. He told her, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to bread and toss it to their dogs. So, he says, first the Jews, as we understand the meaning of the parable, then, not crumbs, but the bread will be given to the Gentiles. Jesus never had the intention of giving this woman some second-rate gospel. The same bread that the Jews were offered, that same bread would be offered to the Gentiles. The same gospel, the same Jesus, the same forgiveness of sins, the same blessings of the gospel for Jew and Gentile alike.

Whatever your need, whatever my need, whatever our need, I think we would concur that even crumbs from Jesus would be enough. But praise God, there is more on offer, much more than just the crumbs.

[34 : 02] This morning, I offer to you the bread of life. This morning, I place before you, Jesus. Trust and believe. Eat and be satisfied.

Will you eat the crumbs? Will you eat the bread of life? Will you repent and believe and put your trust in Jesus, the bread of life? What are the barriers, perhaps, that stand in the way of trusting in Jesus?

What about this woman? What might have held her back? We thank God that none of these things did hold her back. But what might have held her back? She could have been held back by unbelief.

When she hears the stories of this man in Galilee who casts out demons. And she could have said, yeah, right. Yeah, a Jew is going to cast out the demon from my daughter. Yeah, right. That's not going to happen.

Why would I waste my time approaching this man? He can't help me. Held back by unbelief. My problem is too big, too great.

[35 : 10] And that can hold you back. Why would Jesus help me? My problem is too big. My unbelief is too great. Why come to Jesus? This woman could have been held back by fear. She might have thought, well, maybe he can help me. But who am I to approach this man? I'm too sinful. I'm too unworthy. I'm too different. Jesus is not for the likes of me. He might reject me. He might turn me away.

He might do what the disciples were doing. And so for fear of rejection, for fear of being let down, for fear of being disappointed, there is that reluctance. Or there could have been in this woman a reluctance to approach Jesus. Thank God she overcame that fear. But perhaps there could be another barrier that could have held her back. Maybe even, even in the midst of her terrible circumstances, she could have been held back by pride. Who is this man? He compares me to a dog.

He can't help me. I'm not going to listen to him. How dare he speak of me in that way? I wonder if today there are those who are held back from coming to Jesus because of pride. You read in the Bible, you say, well, I can't accept that. I can't accept that teaching. No, no, no, that's not, that doesn't go with me. I've got no time for a man who writes such things. No, no, no, no. I'm above that.

And so pride can keep us back from coming to the one, the only one who can satisfy our deepest need, the bread of life who can feed us, feed our souls, and feed us in a way that we will never go hungry again, the one who can satisfy to the very depths of our being all that we seek to satisfy in other ways by our academic success, by our material possessions, by the relationships we build and cultivate. All of these things good in their place and yet unable to satisfy ultimately and permanently, Jesus is able to satisfy ultimately and permanently. And may God help us overcome any barriers there might be before us from approaching Him as this woman did and discovering that He is able and willing to satisfy us. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank

You for Your Son. We thank You for Jesus. We thank You that the One who was sent to bring home the lost sheep of Israel, the sheep of Israel, was also sent to, in turn, gather in the nations of the world.

[38 : 08] And we thank You that the same Jesus, who is the Messiah for the Jews, is the Messiah for the Gentiles. The same salvation is offered to all without distinction. And we thank You that we are indeed those who have been brought in. And we pray that we would be those who would invite others to be brought in. We thank You for the powerful working of Your Holy Spirit that we see in the life of this woman, granting her an insight that exceeded that even of the disciples and of the religious leaders.

And help us to be encouraged by that as we go out into this world, marked by great ignorance of Your Word and of Your gospel, in the confidence and the assurance that by Your Spirit you can open the darkest mind and give insight to the most unlikely sinner. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.