

Exegetical Brief: Matthew 15:27 The Canaanite Woman's Great Faith

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When Jesus calls someone's faith great, we stand up and take notice. Preachers have opportunity to expound on such a faith in the appointed Gospel for Pentecost 13, the account of the Canaanite woman recorded in Matthew 15: 21-28. Many characteristics of the woman's faith jump out at us when we first read the text. There is the way she earnestly and persistently pleaded with Christ to heal her demon-possessed daughter. There is the way she firmly believed that in the Son of David there was power to heal. But her great faith is especially on display in the words she chose to make her request of the Lord. We shall focus on her words in verse 27 and an exegetical question that arises from the way those words are translated.

Recall how Christ had already reminded this Gentile woman that, in God's economy of salvation, Jesus' earthly ministry was to be to the Jew first. He made this point directly (v. 24: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel") and metaphorically (v. 26: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs"). It is the woman's reply to Christ's words which would elicit his assessment of her faith. In verse 27 she said:

Ναὶ, κύριε, καὶ γὰρ τὰ κυνάρια ἐσθίει ἀπὸ τῶν ψιγίων τῶν πιπτόντων ἀπὸ τῆς τραπέζης τῶν κυρίων αὐτῶν.

Translation: Yes, Lord, for even the dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

The way καὶ γὰρ is translated is significant as we consider what made this woman's faith great. Curiously, the NIV renders the phrase "but even." All other English versions I consulted translate it with the same adversative idea. The καὶ γὰρ combination occurs thirty-nine times in the New Testament. Only here does the NIV translate it adversatively. Its more natural translation would be "for even." The words intensify the truthfulness of what comes before, much the way we use the expression "in fact." This woman was in total agreement with Jesus' description of her place in God's order of things. She accepted her position as a "dog" (Gentile) that must wait for the "children" (Jews) to be fed with the food of the gospel first. She looked forward to the way Christ would bless her since she was in that position. Her answer is "Yes indeed!" not "Yes, but..."

Consider the character of the Canaanite woman's words if we translate the καὶ γὰρ adversatively, as the NIV does. Her reply comes off as a debate with Christ, perhaps even mild argument. Translating καὶ γὰρ "but even" shades her reply into sounding like a counterpoint of what Jesus had just said. For this reason preachers may be led to laud her cleverness rather than her conviction when they explain her great faith to their congregations.

It was not cleverness that made this woman's faith great. She did not debate her way into Christ's admiration. Hers was a simple yet strong trust that God's way was the best way. She accepted, without question, God's will for her life and the life of her daughter. She agreed with everything Jesus had told her, even when his statements would have caused others to walk away. This is what made her faith great. Translating her καὶ γὰρ in the natural way, "for even," will help the preacher show her great faith to his congregation.