**WOMAN, YOU HAVE GREAT FAITH!**

January 20, 2019

Matthew 15:1-28

Key Verse 15:28 “Then Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed at that moment.”

In this passage, the word “defile” appears many times. It means polluted, unclean, or dirty. Human beings are very much interested in being clean before God. For example, right now, Hindu festival, Kumbh Mela is going on. They believe that by taking a dip in Ganges River, their sins are cleansed. They say that it is the largest festival in the world; 150 million people attend there. Likewise, in the Old Testament, especially in Leviticus, there are many rules regarding clean and unclean. For example, they were considered defiled if they touched a dead animal; a woman was unclean if she had an issue of blood, even if that issue of blood was that of her monthly period. They were unclean after childbirth, or after touching anyone with leprosy, if they touched the dead or had contact with someone who touched the dead. Notice that it does not say that these things were sinful. It is not sinful to have a child, or to touch a dead body, or to have a period. The Bible simply says that they make a person ceremonially unclean, namely, they could not come to worship God. In today’s passage, Jesus teaches that what defiles a person is not outward things, but that our heart is defiled. No outward ceremonies will cleanse our hearts. What can cleanse us? Who can come to God and worship him? The Canaanite woman demonstrates that God accepts anyone who comes to him by faith and cleanses them. She was considered unclean by the Jews, but Jesus admired her, saying, “Woman, you have great faith!”

**First**, what really defiles a person (1-20). At that time, Jesus was in Gennesaret, in northwestern Galilee, healing many sick people. While he was there, some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to him from Jerusalem to confront and accuse Jesus. They asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” (2) It was not a matter of hygiene. Every mother says to her children, “Wash your hands before dinner.” But what the Pharisees were talking about was a matter of ceremonial washing. They used an egg shell of water to run through their wrists, and they were considered ceremonially clean. To the Jews, handwashing was the symbol of being clean in the sight of God. They wanted to approach God and worship God. But Jesus did not think so. He considered handwashing entirely a ceremonial matter, just a ritualistic procedure; handwashing does not make a person clean before God. Not only that, the Pharisees considered these traditions as equal as God’s commands. Look at verse 3. Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” (3) Jesus cited the fifth commandment from Exodus 20:12, “Honor your father and mother,” as well as Exodus 21:17, “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.” This is the command of God which must be kept. However, they did not want to support their aged parents financially. So, they made a rule that if anyone declared, “this money is devoted to God,” they could avoid using it for their parents. In truth, they just wanted to keep it for themselves. With a man-made rule, they justified breaking the command of God. Jesus said, “Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (6b).

In verses 7-9, Jesus points out their real problem: “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’” The word “hypocrite” means “an actor under an assumed character.” For example, Bill Cosby, a famous comedian played a wonderful father in a television series. So, people thought he was like that in his personal life. But in reality, he used the power of celebrity to deceive and abuse many women. Likewise, the religious leaders said many wonderful words to honor God and appeared to be holy. But in their hearts, they did not honor God at all. Rather, they were filled with greed and lust. God does not see just what is outside; he looks at the heart (1Sa 16:7). We must examine our hearts based on the word of God. We can deceive others. But we cannot deceive God. Let’s ask ourselves, “Am I honoring God from my heart?”

After rebuking the religious leaders, Jesus turned toward the crowd. He said, “Listen and understand. What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them” (10-11). Jesus’ teaching was completely revolutionary. The disciples were shaken by this complete reversal of all they had been taught about clean and unclean foods. It was like a parable to them, namely, an obscure and veiled narrative. So Peter asked, “Explain the parable to us” (15). Peter might have expected to hear, “Good question, Peter!” Instead, Jesus said, “Are you still so dull?” (16) In raising them as leaders, Jesus was sometimes sharp and challenging. He wanted them to be alert, engaged, and aware. Jesus wanted Peter to really think about the meaning of his teachings. Then, based on human metabolism, Jesus explained the point he wanted them to understand. Whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body (17). Such things cannot defile a person. But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and that is what defiles them (18). For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander (19). These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them (20).

Here, the word “heart” is emphasized. This is the central or innermost part of a human being. The most serious consequence of Adam’s fall was the utter corruption or defilement of the human heart. When we see babies, they look very cute. But the first words out of their mouths are often, “No!” or “Mine!” It shows us that they are naturally rebellious, selfish and greedy. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” With sin staining our hearts, the very core of our being, how can we ever be clean? We cannot be clean through religious activities, doing good deeds, or psychotherapy. For us to be clean, our hearts must be cleansed. We cannot buy heart cleansing medicine with money. How can our hearts be cleansed? Firstly, only by the blood of Jesus. 1 John 1:7b says, “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” Hebrews 9:14 says, “the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!” Secondly, by the word of God. Psalm 119:9 says, “How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.”

Apostle Peter probably did not understand the deep meaning of Jesus’ teaching at the time. But later, after Jesus died and rose again, the Holy Spirit inspired him to realize that the human heart can be transformed by the gospel truth. When a heart is transformed, all kinds of sinful desires disappear and the genuine love of God fills one’s heart. In 1 Peter 1:22-23, Peter said, “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” When sinful desires fill our hearts, we are not happy. Even though we dress up and speak well, what we do is evil. We are filled with anxiety, fear, sorrow, hatred, envy, guilt, shame. But when our hearts are cleansed by the blood of Jesus, we are full of peace and thanksgiving and joy. Then we can honor God, love one another and serve others joyfully. Lee Strobel worked for the Chicago Tribune as an investigative journalist. When his wife Leslie became a Christian, he set out to prove that Christianity was a cult. His heart was hard and unforgiving, especially toward his father, and he was mean. Leslie prayed earnestly to God to remove Lee’s heart of stone and give him a heart of flesh. The gospel truth moved him and his heart totally changed. He became a gospel worker, full of God’s love, and wrote many books such as “The Case for Christ.” Jesus can change anyone’s heart. Let’s come to Jesus who cleanses our hearts with his precious blood.

**Second**, what really matters to Jesus is faith (21-28). Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon, about 30 miles northwest of Gennesaret (21). This was a Gentile territory. Jesus wanted to have a quiet time with his disciples, avoiding the annoying religious leaders. But this quiet time was disturbed. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon possessed and suffering terribly” (22). In contrast with the religious leaders, she acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. She must have heard the news that Jesus healed the sick and drove out demons by the power of God, and she simply believed. She humbly asked, “Have mercy on me.” She identified herself with her daughter, who was suffering from demon possession. She had a compassionate heart. She also knew that her daughter’s problem was a spiritual problem. She believed that Jesus could solve this problem. She came to Jesus with a sense of urgency.

Usually Jesus responded to such pleas for mercy right away. But this time was different. Jesus did not say a word (23a). Why did Jesus do this? It was to strengthen her faith through testing. Though Jesus seemed to intentionally ignore her, the woman did not give up. She persistently cried out for help until the disciples were bothered. They came to Jesus and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us” (23b). He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (24). Jesus did not simply react to human need. He followed God’s salvation plan: first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles. It was another humiliating comment. But the woman was not offended. Instead, she came closer to Jesus and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said (25).

Though Jesus seemed to push her away, she pressed more closely toward Jesus. This is the expression of faith. Then Jesus said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs” (26). This seems to be the biggest insult of all. The Jews frequently insulted Gentiles by calling them “dogs.” They were referring to wild, dirty, scavengers. But the word Jesus used here is different; it is for a pet dog. Anyway, a dog is a dog. Any woman who is called a dog could become very upset. However, this woman was different. She said, “Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table” (27). Dogs sit at the feet of their masters during meals, craving bits of food out of the master’s mercy. They don’t jump up on the table and start eating out of the master’s dish. Even if the owner does not give them crumbs, they don’t protest or become rebellious. They just keep begging. This is what the woman was doing. For her, it was better to be a dog and receive God’s grace than be a human and does not receive God’s grace.

How could she respond in this way? It was because she was truly humble before Jesus. She must have been humbled through her experience with her daughter. How many times had she watched her daughter behave wickedly due to the demon’s influence. Each time it broke her heart a little more. She must have tried everything. But nothing could help. Now she knew that only Jesus could help her. She was determined to receive his help as a matter of life and death. There was no “Plan B,” there was no tomorrow, there was only Jesus in this moment as the only salvation from her misery. Children are the great trainers for their parents. There is no way for parents to escape training through their children. God is very wise. God trained this woman until she was really humble. Here we see that humility is the foundation for deep and great faith. Many of us are in the situation of pleading with Jesus and not hearing his immediate answer. Surely, he is training us in humility and faith. So, let’s not give up, but keep pleading. In the gospels, when Jesus was feeding the children of Israel, crumbs were dropping to the Gentiles. Finally, when the church was born, God’s blessings were poured upon the Gentiles.

How did Jesus respond? He said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment (28). Jesus commended her, saying, “you have great faith” and blessed her faith. The Greek word for “great” is “mega.” So Jesus says, “Woman, you have mega-faith.” Here we learn that what really matters to Jesus is faith. We can learn what faith is through the woman. She acknowledged that Jesus is the Messiah and came to him with her problem. She did not give up pleading with Jesus even though he said some things that were hard to accept. Jesus did not grant her request right away. She did not doubt his love and become bitter or fatalistic and complain. She was not demanding but asked mercy. In contrast with the religious leaders, she was humble and trusting. Here great faith is a relative term. To her, it was great faith because she had so little to begin with. On the other hand, when Jesus rebuked his disciples, “You of little faith,” it is only little in a relative sense; relative to all they knew and to all they had been exposed to, they should have had a greater faith. But in her case, this is great faith. That is why Spurgeon says, “The Lord of glory surrendered to the faith of the woman.”

Today we learned that what matters to God is not outward observance, but our heart. When we humble ourselves before God, God will surely hear our prayers and consider us clean before him.