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*When we pray we should be ready to take our place
as deserving nothing and yet as recipients of God's
grace because we are His children.*

PRINCIPLES OF PRAYER

by CHARLES CALDWELL RYRIE*

The Miracle of the Healing of the
Syrophoenician's Daughter
(Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30)

IT is not always an unworthy thing for a Christian to withdraw. When Paul and his party on the first missionary journey were aware of organized opposition against them in Iconium, they "fled unto Lystra and Derbe" (Acts 14:6). The wise men avoided Herod by returning home by another route, and Joseph was commanded to flee into Egypt in order to save the life of the child Jesus (Matt. 2:12-13). On occasion during His ministry our Lord avoided an undesirable situation by simply absenting Himself. One such instance occurred shortly before the miracle under consideration.

After the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and before departing for Capernaum, He withdrew because He "perceived that they would come and take Him by force, to make Him a king" (John 6:15). But even in Capernaum He was not safe from the insistence of the people, especially after He had again offended the Pharisees by calling them hypocrites (Matt. 15:1-20). So our Lord and His disciples sought escape and rest in Phoenicia. This was the district which enclosed the coast and the plain from Mt. Carmel northward, the two chief cities of which were Tyre and Sidon.

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The inhabitants of that district were descendants of the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of Palestine (cf. Gen. 10:15) and, being pagan, they bore a special ill will toward the Jews. As far as the record goes, our Lord had no ministry there except this miracle of the healing of the daughter of one of these people.

The record of the miracle is doubtless familiar. The woman's daughter was plagued with a demon. Having heard, evidently, of the Lord's reputation as a miracle worker, the mother besought Him to heal her daughter. But His answer reminded her that, since she was not an Israelite, she was excluded from His ministry. It was not until she took her place as a Gentile "dog" that her request was granted. Though the incident has often appeared strange and difficult of explanation, this story furnishes one of the finest illustrations in the Word of God of certain basic principles of prayer.

1. Principles in Relation to the Asking

Prayer must be directed. When the woman first came "she cried unto Him" (Matt. 15:22). Because the report of His work had reached her district she approached Him directly. Addressing Him as she did, "O Lord, Thou Son of David," does not necessarily indicate that she gave personal assent to all of His claims, but rather that she was using a well-recognized title which had become a customary form of address by now (cf. Matt. 9:27; 12:23). However, if she had recognized the significance of the title, "Son of David," she would have known that it was related to the fulfilment of God's promises. Thus her coming was to the One who could answer because He was the fulfiller of the promises. So it should be always in prayer. Go directly to Him who has the answers and who was promised always to keep His Word.

Prayer must be definite. The mother had a definite need, for Matthew reports that the daughter was badly demonized, and the woman asked concerning that definite need. God delights in our being definite; alas, we seem to delight in being the opposite. We know that God has obligated Himself to supply all our needs (Phil. 4:19), but too often we are guilty of asking, not for our needs but for things to be consumed on our own desires (Jas. 4:3). Sometimes we should

ask the Lord to show us our needs; then when the supply comes in answer to definite prayer, as it will, we shall be able to recognize it.

Prayer must be determined. The Lord warned against vain repetition (Matt. 6:7) but enjoined persistence (Luke 11:5-10; 18:1-8). Three times this woman sought the Lord concerning the request. The first occasion was evidently out of doors, while He was on the way to the house where He resided (Matt. 15:22). The second and third times were in the house (Matt. 15:25, 27; Mark's account apparently begins when they reached the house, that is, at Matt. 15:25). It is interesting to notice that, after the first instance when the definite request was made, the woman did not repeat the specific petition again. The second and third times she merely supplicated Him. That is the difference between persistence and vain repetition. The mother's actions on these occasions are a wonderful illustration of "ask . . . seek . . . knock" (Luke 11:9). The first time she asked. Then, inside the house, she sought the Lord, for she came "and worshipped Him." Finally she knocked as she persisted in the Lord's presence. Then, and only then, was her petition granted.

Prayer must be dispensational. The Syrophenician's second appeal was answered by the Lord in a seemingly strange way, for He said: "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs" (Mark 7:27). Those words were not spoken to be offensive intentionally, but simply to state a fact: the fact that Christ was "not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The woman's need alone did not give her the privilege of asking. She was a Gentile and as such had no guaranteed basis on which to approach God in prayer. It is true that her prayer was answered, but the answer came because of the grace of the Lord and not because of any relationship which existed between the Lord and the Canaanites. There are dispensational aspects to prayer, and the most important one is this: "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full (John 16:24). The basis of all prayer today is new—in the name of Christ. No prayer was ever offered in Old Testament times on that basis, whereas no prayer should be offered by any saint today on any other basis.

2. Principles in Relation to the Answering

There may be silence. To the Syrophenician woman's first request our Lord "answered not a word." Often it is so when we pray—seemingly the heavens are closed and all is silent. But do not forget that although the woman was not *answered* she was *heard*. Silence does not mean deafness with God. This is our assurance always.

There will be sustaining. Neither does silence mean denial, for by His silence the Lord did not mean to repel the woman; rather He meant to instruct her. Thus the Lord had words of reply to her second request: "Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it unto the dogs." Although this might seem to be a denial, yet there are several things which should have sustained the mother. For one thing, the Lord said that the children had to be filled *first*. This could be taken as implying that Gentiles would be filled later. Further, the Lord used the diminutive word for dogs—"little dogs"—which is generally used for household pets. In other words, He was not especially comparing her as a Gentile to the dogs of the street but to the pets in the family, who would get a portion from the table even though it was not the children's portion. "Thus the term, which on Jewish lips was usually a reproach, is used by the Lord to open a door of hope through which the suppliant is not slow to enter."¹ Household dogs were fed. She knew that and was sustained by it. She did not deny her place as a "dog" but rather grasped at the privilege of being a household dog who would be entitled to some of the crumbs from the table.

¹ H. B. Swete, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, (p. 149).

It is always so in prayer. In times when the Lord seems not to be concerned with answering, He is careful to give graciously those things which will sustain us as we wait before Him. May our eyes be open to see and our faith encouraged to believe that He does hear and is constantly sustaining until the answer comes.

There is always supply. Finally, in answer to the woman's faith, her request was granted. That faith was not presumptuous, for she took her place as a "dog"; but it was persist-

ently placed in the One who had power to heal her daughter, and that made it great. God always answers our prayers by supplying our needs. He does not always give us what we want when we want it, but He always supplies. Sometimes prayers are unanswered (from our human point of view) because of sin which causes them to be misdirected, but sometimes our unanswered prayers (again from man's point of view) are in reality the answers to our Lord's prayers as He intercedes at the right hand of the Father. "Instead of charging ourselves with being altogether responsible with our many unanswered prayers, [of] lack of faith or something else in our imperfect and sinful lives, why not look upon our unanswered prayers as being the answers of the perfect prayers of intercession at the right hand of God?"² In prayer we should take our place as deserving nothing and yet as those who stand in relationship to God as sons; then we must ask, seek, and knock, and God will answer according to His will. May the Lord help us in our asking, that it may be properly done; and in the answering that it may be properly discerned.

² A. C. Gaebelien, *The Mystery of Unanswered Prayer and Its Biblical Solution* (pp. 45-46).