

Crumbs From The Master's Table

A Sermon by Rev. Grant H. Odhner

How does it strike you, when you hear the story about Jesus and the Gentile woman from Canaan, when He ignores her. Isn't it disconcerting? It seems all wrong! At first glance it seems to do violence to our picture of a loving and reasonable God. How could He turn His back and walk on ignoring her, when she is crying out so pitifully for mercy?

The Lord's stated reason for doing this is also puzzling. It seems out of keeping with His attitude on other occasions. "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15.24). Didn't Jesus come to save all people?

Here is where it helps to know that the Word was written not only in a language of words, but at the same time in a language of symbols or "correspondences." These symbols help us see a more universal and spiritual meaning or sense that relates to our lives today and will relate to people's lives a million years from now.

What did the Lord mean by "lost sheep of the house of Israel?" Literally, He was speaking of the "Jews." But in the deeper sense of the Word the "Jews" don't mean those of Jewish heritage; they stand for people of the church. More universally they stand for the spiritual element in every human being. This is the part of us that's "favored" by the Lord, that's "chosen" for blessing. It's the spiritual part of us that's able to have a direct relationship with Him, for it alone is capable of receiving His unselfish love and wisdom and responding from them. The "Israelite" in us is the part of us that know and can keep covenant with our God.

By contrast, "Gentiles" in the Word stand for the natural element in us. The outer, worldly part of us is not able to have direct relationship with the Lord, except so far as it comes into line with the spiritual element in us. It must be a servant to the spiritual part. Our outer life can indeed receive the Lord's blessing, but only through our inner life -- just as the "Nations of the world" would be blessed only "in Abraham's seed," by grabbing hold of a Jew's robe and following him (Gen. 12.3, 22.18; Zech 8.23; cf. Is 2.2-4, 45.14).

This incident, like nearly all of the incidents recorded in the Word, aims for something deeper than what's on the surface. It appears that this is a simple story about great faith. It is; but it's much more! On the surface the Lord seems to be favoring one class of people over another. He seems to be saying that one is better. Actually, He is making a distinction between two different levels of every person's life. Let's look more closely at our story.

It begins with the "woman of Canaan" crying out to the Lord as He walked by. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!" Her daughter was severely demon-possessed. But the Lord "answered her not a word."

Again, this seems cruel and uncharacteristic of a loving God. If His aim is to make us happy, and it's in His power to help us, why wouldn't He help? But wait! Does the Lord in fact answer our every desire? Does He answer them at once? Would He be loving and wise, if He did? Would answering all our desires bring us lasting happiness?

There is a part of us that has a very shortsighted idea of what blessing is. Our "natural person" is like this. This part of us wants physical comfort and pleasure, it wants worldly security, it wants ego-strokes, it wants satisfaction from everything that it meets and from everything that it does. None of these things is bad. On the contrary. The problem is that our "natural person" wants these things only for natural reasons. It is not concerned with being right with others (except so far as it sees this as affecting its own well-being); it has no real regard for other people as independent human beings; it has no concept of eternal life; it has no concept of the Lord (other than perhaps as Someone who can give it what it wants).

Our "natural person" tends to affect all our hopes and longings. If we wish for spiritual companionship, our "natural person" says, "Yes, please give it to me now." If we are longing to be free of some pain, it says, "Yes, quick, heal my symptoms!" It gives no thought to addressing the causes; it has no wish to gain something more long-term.

When our "spiritual person" is "master" it too looks for relief from pain, but it sees the natural element that's present in its desire for relief. And it subordinates that natural desire for relief to its spiritual desire to be right with the Lord, to be right with its neighbor, to right in the long-term. It doesn't let the natural desire become its main source of motivating

energy. If this happens, the natural desire inevitably meets with failure (we don't find quick relief); then it generates negative feelings like anger, resentment, jealousy.

From this we can see why the Lord didn't respond to the Gentile woman's cries. She stands for the desires of the "outer person." She stands for the part of us that wants relief (or blessing) for purely natural reasons.

Note that the Lord first interacts with the woman through the disciples. They came closer and urged Him, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." And He responds to them, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The "disciples" ("learners") stand for truths, and for the understanding-part of us (which learns and retains truths). In other words, they stand for the perspective that we have from truth. The Lord instructs our natural desires (the gentile woman) through our understanding (disciples). Our "natural person," when it is unregenerate, can't receive the Lord; but our understanding can. And through our understanding our "natural person" can change.

The Lord's literal message was, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." His spiritual message was that His saving life can be given only to the unselfish affections of our "spiritual person." These unselfish affections are the "sheep of the house of Israel." He explains that it's these inner affections that He has come to restore.

So the woman heard His message, addressed to the disciples, and made another attempt. She "came and worshiped Him, saying 'Lord, help me!'" Symbolically "coming nearer" to the Lord means changing our life and attitude and becoming more receptive of Him. This is how we come closer to Him. "Worshiping" or "prostrating" ourselves means to bring our life into line with what is above, with what should rule in us. It's only when the woman does this that the Lord responds directly to her.

Surprisingly, the Lord likens the woman who has humbled herself before Him to a dog, begging for the children's food. He says to the woman: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

There's an interesting connection between the word "worship" and "dog." The Greek word used here for "worship" (proskuneo) comes from the words "dog" (kuon) and "towards" (pros). The root image is of a dog moving to its master's feet and showing subservience and loyal

affection. Spiritually, the image fits well with the deeper meaning of our story. The Jews commonly referred to the Gentiles as "dogs." The attitude of contempt implied here was unfortunate. But the Gentiles, like dogs, did represent the natural level of awareness and functioning, which must find its place in subordination to the spiritual level. Specifically "dogs" stand for natural desires and appetites (good ones when tame and obedient, bad ones when not tame.

Note that the woman responded to the Lord in the same terms as He used to address her. She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table." Think of the implications here! First by her worship, then by her words, she acknowledged that she was a "dog" "eating crumbs from the masters' table." She acknowledged her subordination to Him and, by implication, her subordination to the "children of Israel," the "masters" from whose "table" her help came down. In this we see, on a deeper level, our natural desire placing itself in proper relation to the Divine will and in proper relation to the spiritual level of desiring. When this subordination has taken place, then the Lord can say to our "natural person," "Let it be to you as you desire." Then healing and blessing can come even to the natural level of our lives.

The true feast that the Lord invites us to, that He prepares for us, is a spiritual one. It is a table set for the "masters" and not for the "servants," for the "children" and not for the "dogs."

Note well: it is not that the Lord withholds His blessing from our natural person. It only seems that way to us. In reality our natural desires simply aren't able to receive His genuine blessing by themselves; they aren't sensitive to it; they are not looking for the right thing. What the Lord gives to our "spiritual person" is not a physical enjoyment and worldly prosperity ((the only kinds of thing our natural person can appreciate). Rather, what He gives is an inner sense of well-being, trust, satisfaction. These inner feelings have little to do with our outer success and good fortune, and everything to do with having our priorities straight, with loving the Lord's order above our own present desires, with wishing well toward our fellow human beings.

"Crumbs" do "fall from the upper table" and bring nourishment to our natural lives. Indeed, the outer blessings that the Lord brings to us are not called "crumbs" for their insufficiency but for their insignificance relative to the blessings that our "spiritual person" can receive. In fact,

these "crumbs" are like the "fragments" which the disciples collected after the "feeding of the 4000": they took up seven baskets full (more than the original seven loaves which the Lord broke! The Lord multiplies the blessings and enjoyments of our natural lives beyond measure, whenever it's possible and in harmony with our long-term good.

So let us remember what it is in us, and in our lives, that the Lord comes to establish "relationship" with. Let us remember what He longs to touch and to bless most in us. And let us seek to strengthen that element in our lives. That is the true treasure!

Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you.. John 6.27
Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Mt 6.19-21

Amen.

Lessons: Mt 15.21-39; AC 318.