

## ***NEVER GIVE UP!***

### **The Tests of an Unnamed Canaanite**

It's getting tougher all the time. Jesus said that "because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). We're there, and some are giving up. The pressure of compromise can trump the prayer of commitment.

Jesus once told a story about a widow who persevered and received what she needed. The answer came from a judge who wasn't inclined to help her. Jesus told it so that we would "always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). He concluded the parable by asking this troublesome question: "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (v. 8). Jesus saw many quitting as end-time pressures escalated. He was spelling faith p-e-r-s-i-s-t-e-n-c-e, and few things gave Him more encouragement than seeing it lived out. Two things moved Him deeply—great faith and the lack of it. He told a would-be disciple whose competing priorities threatened to sideline him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

He illustrated persistence—faith for the long haul—through the host who is surprised (and bread-less) by a midnight guest and goes next door. He is turned down by his friend who says: "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything" (Luke 11:7). Sounds like a "no" to me. Wouldn't that have sent you away? Not the desperate inquirer. He was not prepared to accept anything but a positive answer—and he walked away with bread in hand.

I was preparing to speak to a group of pastors in Finland. As I thought about it, I saw an image of people throwing in the towel. So before the message, I asked ministers who had considered quitting within the last few weeks to stand—and ten promptly rose. I wasn't expecting that kind of response. Pressures that did not let up made them look at their alternatives.

I ran a few marathons in my younger days. On the race that I had trained for the least, my mind kept thinking of other things I would rather be doing, like sitting in a Jacuzzi. Winning the mental battle rivaled the physical pain. Giving up looked like the preferred option. Whom do you know who might be thinking about quitting the race next weekend? Many good people will. I hope you are not one of them.

Now to an example of endurance that impressed Jesus. He had just experienced another unsettling encounter with the religious leadership. He withdrew to the north of Galilee for a retreat with His disciples. "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it" (Mark 7:24), but it usually didn't work for the Son of Man to travel incognito. "A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession'" (Matt. 15:22). She properly identified Him not only as "Lord," but this non-Jew called Him the "Son of David."

The Jesus we know is moved by the faith of parents on behalf of their children who struggle, especially when the cause is rooted in the arch-enemy, and when we are told that this little girl is hopelessly demonized (7:25). We expect Jesus to move into action quickly. Every instance in the Gospels shows Jesus responding to such a request—but this one. Matthew says that “Jesus did not answer a word” (v. 23). Not a knowing nod that could say, “I am thinking about it.” Not a polite, “I’ll be with you in a moment.” Nothing.

***Don’t give up when God is silent.*** The inactivity of God can disturb even mature suffering saints. It did for the elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, called “righteous before God.” Why doesn’t God say more? Why doesn’t He do something? If He is all-loving and all-powerful, He both wants to and is able to help us. Maybe He is not as mighty as we thought.

Or we can interpret God’s silence as disfavor. Maybe I was wrong in asking. Perhaps my timing was off. Maybe I need to learn something first. He’s probably teaching me a lesson because of what I did last month—or last year. And questions bombard our troubled minds as we attempt to take a passive God off the hook. It does not feel good to be ignored, especially by heaven. We want to ask, “Don’t you see me, God? Can’t you hear? Why aren’t you doing more?” To ignore is to insult. Perhaps she thought, “Maybe I’m being rebuffed because I’m the wrong gender. Maybe I am inferior to men, at least to these men.”

At other times we interpret His non-response as absence. If He is not talking, He must not be here. He is not as close as I had hoped. For the woman, the silence of Jesus could certainly have translated into indifference. Was He not even slightly moved by a heartfelt request? Where’s the mercy I have heard about? Don’t I count?

In fact, silence often reveals love. Jesus is drawing this woman into a place where she will see His power demonstrated. He is quietly setting her up for a miracle. She could have missed it by responding wrongly to His inactivity. Jesus knew her heart. He saw her pressing in. He risked the silence because she would not be turned away by it. He was always touched by the human condition. He stopped a funeral procession because of a weeping mother. He halted synagogue services because of an eighteen-year long malady. And “the man of sorrows” delayed a crowd on the way to care for a girl in order to bring healing to a desperate woman with a condition that did not yield to over a decade of medical care. So you need not give up when God is silent. He is engineering divine activity in response to your plea. He will show mercy—that is who He is!

***Don’t give up when people are impatient with you.*** While Jesus was silent, the disciples were not; they were irritated. Some people are bugged by our hardships. What plagues us perturbs others. No one could feel for the daughter the way the mother did. The disciples, however, wanted their time with Jesus. They deserved this exclusive retreat with the Master. “So his disciples came to him and urged him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us’” (v. 23). Make that the second “no” she received. Hardly encouraging words. This flies in the face of everything she has heard concerning Jesus

and His band of men. She could easily have left at this point with hurt feelings, hardened against ever believing again. Sometimes the people of God don't reflect the heart of God, and their coldness can be deeply discouraging. We can give up because people don't seem to care. When people respond to our cry with a cool stare or worse, make us feel like we are intruding, we don't feel much like persevering. It was hard enough to go public with our request. Obviously, we don't count for much.

This was not the first time that the disciples wanted to send someone away. They tried to transport a crowd of over five thousand, hoping for some down time with Jesus. That didn't work then either. Jesus was not irritated as the disciples were—but His silence could make it look that way. They incorrectly took his apparent passivity as apathy. Wrong!

***Don't give up when you are overlooked.*** When Jesus opened His mouth, it was worse than His silence. He said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (v. 24). The Son of David knew His target audience—and she didn't match His agenda. She had recognized that something about Him and His religion didn't fit her practices. But then Jesus let her know about her "inferior" nationality. Too bad for this Canaanite. It's hard to know that you won't receive preferential treatment, that you're second rate. God has His close friends. You just don't happen to be one of them. At least it can feel that way. Rebuff number three.

Some testimonies can actually arouse jealousy in our hearts. God healed her cancer; why not mine? God met their financial needs with an unexpected gift. I didn't know He had favorites. God rescued their kids from the pit. Isn't our turn next? The Book seems to indicate that God doesn't give preferential treatment, but the evidence argues against that fact.

But she still somehow heard love coming from Jesus, even behind the sharp words that should have excluded her from His help. Those of us struggling with a victim mentality would have turned our backs on Jesus by now. When God doesn't come through when we desperately need it, when we feel like we are being excluded from the blessings, expectation easily morphs into anger—and we give up on God. Maybe not altogether, but the zeal cools and we settle in to a faith that no longer takes risks.

***Don't give up when you are insulted.*** Okay, one more negative, and potentially the hardest, one that would have sent some of us away in disgust. "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (v. 26). What is He? A racist? A bigot? Is He calling her a dog? Sure sounds like it. But instead of turning and stomping away with her daughter still demonized, she said in effect, "That's right. How about letting this dog have just a few crumbs? It wouldn't take much." What incredible persistence.

"A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (Prov. 19:11). Easier said than pulled off. When people offend us, or when God disappoints us by not doing what we need or doing what we think we didn't need, our wounded hearts can close themselves off from His love. We excuse our resentment toward heaven by

saying that God didn't come through for us. It didn't work for me like it worked for others. But not this woman.

Jesus cannot but respond to her astounding endurance: "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (v. 28). Don't call God reluctant. He simply asks people to press in. We want to say, "If it be your will," which matches *our* passive stance, not His. Our faith easily drifts into fatalism. It resigns itself to an inferior situation rather than persisting and rising to a greater possibility.

Faith, on the other hand, grabs on and does not let go. It does not demand God like a stubborn toddler, but seeks Him in a way that He wants us to. God is called "the rewarder of those who diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The Canaanite went after Jesus in a way few ever did—and He memorialized her faith. She got a bead on Him and could not be distracted. She grabbed hold like a converted pitbull and would not let go.

He didn't say, "Woman, great is your persistence." He called her perseverance faith. She translated humility and faith into boldness, and her young child could thank a powerful mother for her deliverance. Most would have been gone after the door seemed slammed shut. She stuck around after four no's—and received what she came after.

The cause of demonic assault upon children can sometimes rest with a parent. Perhaps she took responsibility for the attack, so she also took responsibility for the release, which Jesus granted because she would not back down. The writer of Hebrews said that "through faith and patience" we inherit the promises of God (Heb. 6:12). Her patience looked like persistence.

Think of the lesson the disciples learned. The woman they wanted to send away was held up for her great faith. Theirs—not so great. Had they been in charge, the daughter would have remained under the power of darkness. How tragic when we allow irritations to rule over the will of God, and people who need deliverance must try elsewhere because of our pettiness or personal demands—like alone time with Jesus.

Only once did Jesus call faith great. Someone from a pagan religion recognized Jesus as one capable of doing the impossible, of delivering her child even from a distance, apparently not even bringing her child along. And an unnamed woman of the wrong race gives us a powerful message: "Never, never give up!"