

Living Under Judgment: A Sermon

59:1-19

Psalm 13

Hebrews 5:12-6:12¹

Mark 10:46-52



There are times when the preacher looks at the lectionary readings and prefers to preach on the gospel text, but knows that would be a cop-out. This is one of those mornings. There's a reason we have a lectionary, and it is important to preach on the readings we are given. So here goes.

I am going to suggest that there is a common theme in the lectionary readings this morning. They all deal with God's judgment in a way that makes us uncomfortable. The uncomfortable part is that they deal with judgment in the lives of believers. This does not fit into the standard Christian narrative of creation, fall, redemption. In the

standard narrative, God's judgment applies to sinners. In the atonement, Christ takes on God's judgment, and sinners are forgiven. Those who repent and place their faith in Christ no longer stand under God's judgment. As Paul writes in Romans, "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1)

Yet a common theme of the readings this morning is that even after redemption, judgment continues, and it is a divine judgment toward believers, of whom we should be able to say "there is no condemnation." Despite divine grace, despite divine forgiveness, despite no condemnation, Scripture seems to speak at times as if there is judgment after all. What do the passages say?

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, the prophet speaks of a judgment on account of ongoing sin. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear, but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God." (Isaiah 59:1-2) This is not a message of judgment against the nations, against those who have worshiped other gods. This is a message of judgment against those who call the Lord, the God of Israel, their God. The prophet puts himself in the place of Israel, of those who know that they stand under divine judgment: "Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us, we hope for light, and behold darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom." (59:9-10). He speaks for those who are conscious of their sin: "We hope for justice, but there is none, for salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgression are with us, and we know our iniquities." (59:12-13).

Exactly what are the sins that the prophet attributes to Israel? Three specifically are mentioned: violence, lies, and theft in the courts. These are basically a summary of typical offenses listed in the Second Table of the Ten Commandments,

sins against the neighbor: "For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity, your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas . . . deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood." Quite an indictment.

Certainly this could read like a description of much that is happening in our own culture, in any culture. But does the indictment apply to Christians, to those in the church? Certainly anyone who knows anything about church history knows that it has applied all too often. In our contemporary churches, we may not use literal violence against one another, but how often do we find ourselves enjoying one of the most characteristic sins of our culture, contempt? Have you read the conservative Anglican blogs lately? Do students or faculty at a Christian seminary ever find themselves forming factions, thinking less than charitably about those who don't see things exactly our way? Do we hold grudges? I am going to engage in a bit of true confession here. There is a particular Episcopal bishop who deposed my priest, and took away our congregation's place of worship seven years ago now. I haven't forgotten. A year or two will go by, and I won't think about it. But then something happens that reminds me, and I confess, my thoughts about that man are less than charitable. Well, perhaps the passage has some significance to some of us. Some of the time.

Turning to the passage in Hebrews, we find another example of divine judgment applied to believers. This time the issue is apostasy. The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who "have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come," and then have fallen away from the faith. The writer says it is impossible to restore these people to repentance, because "they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and

holding him up to contempt.” (Heb. 6:5-6).

This has been a controversial passage in the history of the church. It brings up questions about the doctrine of perseverance of the regenerate, of the possibility of repentance again after apostasy. There were those in the early church who interpreted the passage to mean that there could be no restoration to the church if one sinned after baptism. At the opposite extreme, John Calvin believed that those described in the passage could not be genuine Christians because the elect would not apostatize. I do think the plain meaning of the passage refers to Christians. References to having shared the Holy Spirit would not apply to non-believers.

But this is not the place to enter into those theological discussions. The point is that the author of Hebrews is warning Christians against the danger of apostasy, and making fairly clear that, for those who renounce a Christian faith that they once held, there is divine judgment. As the writer says elsewhere, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31) Certainly this is a real temptation for contemporary Christians. In North America, we do not face the kind of explicit persecution that our fellow Christians face in parts of Africa or Asia, but we do live in a post-modern secular culture in which Christian faith is not only mocked, but accused of being a cause of evil and oppression. And there are lots of other kinds of temptations and inducements to just leave it all behind. Christians in the West do not so often repudiate their faith because of persecution. But way too often they simply forget about it by and by.

So that’s the second form of judgment. If the first case has to do with violations of the second table of the Ten Commandment, apostasy clearly is a violation of the First Table of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3)

There is a third kind of divine judgment for believers, but it is a little different from the first two. We see it in the Psalm. This is the judgment that follows from God's palpable absence: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1) What makes this judgment different is that it is not a consequence of deliberate sin. There is no evidence in the Psalm that the writer is aware of having committed some offense against God or his neighbors. Yet the Psalmist cries out in prayer from a sense of abandonment. The prayer is that one's enemies will not rejoice "because I have been shaken"(v. 4), that one not sleep the sleep of death (v. 3).

This is perhaps the most uncomfortable of the three types of judgment because it seems to make no sense. Scripture is full of the promises of God's blessings on and of his presence to and loving kindness toward those who do his will. Yet here is the prayer of someone who wonders just where God is. This judgment is more of a tempting or a testing than judgment understood as punishment for sin or apostasy.

This theme of God's palpable absence is not a major theme in the history of prayer and spirituality, but it does repeat with such regularity that it is a genuinely ecumenical occurrence. In Martin Luther's theology, he called it *Anfechtung*, Luther's word for doubt or despair. It was not during his monastic life that Luther experienced this misery most keenly, but rather after his insights about justification by faith. The post-Reformation Catholic spiritual writer John of the Cross wrote of *The Dark Night of the Soul*. After Mother Teresa's death, it was revealed in her letters that throughout her life, she struggled with a sense of God's absence. A major theme in the poetry of George Herbert, the Anglican Caroline Divine is that of affliction. Herbert writes:

No screw, no piercer can
Into a piece of timber work and wind,
As God's afflictions into man,

When he a torture hath design'd.

("Confession")

I would imagine that there are very few Christians who have not found themselves facing circumstances at some point in their lives where they find themselves asking in Job-like fashion whether they have been abandoned by God. If this has never happened to you, it will. So this is the third form of divine judgment that applies not to unbelievers, but to Christians.

At the same time that the passages refer to these three kinds of divine judgment, they do not leave us with a simple anomaly. They address the puzzle in two ways. First, all three passages make clear that the context for divine judgment is not condemnation, but grace. Isaiah 59 is part of the lengthy section in the second half of Isaiah that begins with Isaiah chapter 40, the passage that begins with the famous words that are echoed in Handel's Messiah: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40:1) In chapter 50, the prophet writes: "Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away," but the Lord then goes on to ask through the prophet, "Is my hand shortened that it cannot redeem? Or I have no power to deliver?" (50:1,2) In spite of Israel's sin, the passage we read this morning begins, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save." (59:1)

The Hebrews passage warns of God's awful judgment on apostasy, but the apostolic writer then goes on to write, "Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation." (Heb. 6:9) At the end of this morning's chapter, the apostle writes of a "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." (v. 19) Dire warnings about the dangers of apostasy are not to be read outside a

context that speaks of the promise and hope of salvation.

Finally, even in the midst of affliction, of an almost tangible experience of divine abandonment, the Psalmist concludes with assurance: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Ps. 13:5-6)

This is an important observation. When we read the literature of secular unbelief, the writings of the New Atheists like the late Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, they regularly paint an image of the Christian God as a God of judgment, but a judgment without mercy or love. Yet Scripture is clear that the context for God's judgment is always and foremost God's love and redemption. For those who have committed terrible atrocities against their fellow human beings, for those who lie, who steal, and murder, judgment is not the final word. Grace and forgiveness is. Jesus' prayer on the cross was "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) For those who find themselves tempted to apostasy, the final word of Scripture is not judgment, but rather hope of perseverance. For those who feel abandoned by God, the Bible's word is about God's loving kindness and God's deliverance, not God's absence.

So that is the first part of the solution to the puzzle we find in this morning's lectionary readings. In spite of "no condemnation," there can still be judgment, even judgment for believers. But despite this judgment, there is nonetheless grace and forgiveness and redemption, and this grace is more powerful than sin, than apostasy, than affliction. So that is the immediate context to any discussion of divine judgment of Christians. God's judgment is always framed in the context of mercy. In the words of Karl Barth, gospel always precedes law.²

Now for the second part of the solution. If the good news of the gospel always begins with grace, and yet judgment can even

follow grace, how do we get from judgment back to grace again? The solution is in the gospel reading this morning. Bartimaeus is not a Gentile sinner. He is a Jew, a member of the people of God. But the story of Blind Bartimaeus can be read as the story of one who is part of God's covenant community, but who is still under divine judgment. When Jesus appears on the scene, Bartimaeus is much like the Psalmist in Psalm 13. He cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47) But the bystanders rebuke him, and turn him away, and tell him, in essence, "Just shut up!" The story might end there, but Bartimaeus refuses to give up. He makes a regular nuisance of himself. And Jesus heals him. So Jesus is the solution to divine judgment, not only for blatant sinners, but for believers who experience that judgment. But we need to be clear that Jesus is not the solution in a simple straightforward manner. This is not a nice clean story about a healing. This is a story about a man who might well not have been healed, but he refused to "just shut up!"

How does this apply to the three examples of divine judgment we have encountered in the lectionary readings this morning? Jesus is the solution to divine judgment, but in different ways in each case.

When we who are Christians, who have been redeemed by Christ, forget the significance of our redemption, when we hate and take advantage of and lie about or to our fellow human beings, and even our fellow Christians, we are living with an inherent contradiction. For we are refusing to recognize that those whom we sin against are themselves redeemed sinners, sinners forgiven by Christ, just as we claim to be. And should this not leave us without hope, for in denying forgiveness when we have been forgiven, are we not in essence claiming that we no longer need forgiveness? And yet even this does not leave us without hope. Because although we have forgotten about the one who has forgiven us when we do not forgive others, the one we have forgotten about has not forgotten about us. Since we not

only cannot fix the mess, but have made it worse, God has taken upon himself to fix it. As the prophet writes in Isaiah, "The Lord saw it, and it displeased him, that there was no justice . . . then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him." He goes on to say, "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord." (Is 59: 15,16, 20). Isaiah wrote several hundred years before Jesus, but we know who that Redeemer out of Zion is. The key to our redemption is to learn again that we need a Redeemer, and to see Jesus Christ our Redeemer in one another. As Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40) As we are forgiven, so we can learn again to forgive.

What about apostasy? If there were ever a case of an inherent contradiction, this would be it. For in apostasy, we turn our back on our Redeemer. Do we not, as the writer of Hebrews writes, crucify the Son of God again? (Heb. 6:7) Is there no hope for those who do such? Is it truly impossible to ever restore them to repentance? I would suggest that even here there continues to be hope. For as the writer of Hebrews notes, there is a mediator: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15) Karl Barth, in his own discussion of this passage about apostasy in Hebrews, suggests that it is indeed impossible for human beings to restore themselves to repentance. But what is impossible for human beings is well possible for God. When we look at the lives of Christians like St. Augustine or C.S. Lewis, we realize that there can indeed be restoration for those who once abandoned Christian faith, and then returned. And, in the end, it is only the Christ who has redeemed us who will enable us to be faithful, to prevent us from straying, and if we stray, can bring us back.

Finally, there is the judgment of abandonment, of affliction. Like the Psalmist, we pray "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1) Like Bartimaeus, we call out for mercy, but find ourselves shunted aside. But here again, it is Jesus who is our Redeemer, even in affliction. For it was Jesus himself who called out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) when he was abandoned by his Father. Jesus himself did not experience an answer to this prayer except by going through crucifixion. Yet, on the other side of death, resurrection followed. It was in trusting his Father even in divine abandonment that Jesus procured our salvation.

George Herbert's poetry gives us some guidance about redemption in and through affliction. The experience of the absence of God teaches us to rely not on our experiences, whether good or bad, but on faith. Affliction also helps us to recognize that salvation has a narrative character. In the absence of the experience of God's presence, we remember that God has redeemed us in the past, and will do so again. Finally, affliction teaches us to trust in Christ's love. What God has begun in Christ, God will finish. As Herbert writes in his poem, "Assurance," "What for itself love once began, Now love and truth will end in man." So finally, not even the judgment of affliction can separate us from God's love in Christ. What God has begun, he will finish. As Paul writes in Romans, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us." (Rom. 8:35, 37)

We have not been abandoned, in our sins, in our unfaithfulness, even in our loneliness and affliction. Like Bartimaeus, we need to make ourselves nuisances, begging for divine grace, refusing to "just shut up," until we are heard. We have a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses.

Jesus' word to us as it was to Bartimaeus is, "Go your way, your faith has made you well." (Mark 10:52)

1Note: The 1979 BCP lectionary inexcusably omits Hebrews 6:2-8, which in, effect, misses the central point of the passage. The Revised Common Lectionary skips Hebrews 6 completely.

2Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," *Community, State and Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

I came across the following sermon, which I preached ten years ago, and did not remember having written. I think some might find it helpful.

Matthew 15:21-28



We're sometimes told that the basic message of the Bible is very simple, something that even a child can understand. There is a certain truth to that way of looking at things. After all, the Bible contains many stories, and stories are supposed to be easy to read, and easy to understand. Think of the Christmas story. Almost every church has a Christmas pageant in which children play the roles of Joseph and Mary, the baby Jesus, the shepherds and wise men, the angels, and sometimes even the sheep and

donkey. At the same time, even the Christmas story is not so simple as we sometimes think it is—preachers and theologians have been coming up with sermons and books about Christmas for two thousand years

But there are other passages in the Bible that are not at all simple, not at all easy to understand. This morning's gospel reading is a classic example. This morning's gospel reading contains one of the so-called "hard sayings" of Jesus. If you read the gospels or even listen to the gospel lectionary readings on Sunday morning for any length of time, you will eventually encounter them. To save your life, you have to take up your cross and follow Jesus. Whoever does not hate his father or mother or even his own life cannot follow Jesus. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Let the dead bury their dead.

In this morning's gospel, a mother comes to Jesus, desperate for help for her sick daughter. Like any good mother, she cares for her daughter. She has heard that Jesus has the power to heal, and she comes to him, begging for help. He is probably her last resort. No one else has been able to help. Nothing else has worked. Jesus responds to her request by calling her a dog. That would be an insult in any language, in any culture, at any time, but in Jewish culture at that time, it was one of the worst insults that a Jew could think of to use for a Gentile.

How do we respond to such passages of scripture? The simple approach is just to avoid them. A smart preacher would preach on the OT reading this morning. Or we might just not bother with the Bible at all. I heard an older woman say recently that she didn't read the Bible anymore because it was full of contradictions. There are a lot of people who are atheists because they have read passages like this in the Bible. After all, how can we say that Jesus is the Son of God or that he never sinned when the Bible contains passages like this, where

Jesus acts in a manner that seems unloving, even cruel?

I would suggest that this approach is too easy. After all, the Jesus who calls a woman a dog in this morning's gospel is the same Jesus who was born in the manger in Bethlehem, who welcomed little children, who healed countless numbers of people who came to him, who made himself the friend of sinners, like Zacchaeus the tax collector. What makes this passage a difficult passage is that it is uncharacteristic of Jesus' usual behavior. We don't expect Jesus to be rude. We don't expect Jesus to refuse help.

I would suggest that this passage has some important things to say to us, but only if we don't ignore it, and only if we don't approach it in a simplistic way that says that Jesus would never do something like that. If we read the passage carefully, with patience, and allow ourselves to be drawn into it step by step, we will find that it says important things about how a loving God helps us to grow in faith.

The first thing we need to realize is that the gospel writers included the passage for a reason. They knew what they were doing, and they would not have included the story if they thought that it put Jesus in a bad light. The story is included only in Mark's gospel and in Matthew's. It is not in Luke's gospel, although Luke includes many other stories that are in both Mark and Matthew. So Mark and Matthew certainly could have omitted it, just like Luke did. If they included it, it must be because they thought it has something important to say.

Second, we can get some clues about what is happening in the story if we look at other similar stories in the gospels. There are other stories where people come to Jesus for healing. There are other stories where women come to Jesus for healing. The woman who comes to Jesus for healing in this story is not a Jew, but a Gentile, and there are other stories where Gentiles come to Jesus for healing. What is generally

interesting about these other stories is not simply that Jesus heals people—they are not just examples of miracles—but that by healing the kinds of people Jesus heals, he acts against the expectations of his culture in general.

So we know that Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, and people were scandalized by that because they thought it violated the biblical commandment against working on the Sabbath. Jesus healed the Son of a Gentile centurion, which was unusual, because in Jesus' time Jews did not have anything to do with Gentiles, and a Roman soldier normally would have been too proud to come to a Jew for help. There is a story where Jesus healed a woman who was suffering from a hemorrhage, after which he raises from the dead the young daughter of a synagogue official. What is interesting about both these two cases is that Jewish law had very strict rules about whom a person could touch. By allowing himself to be touched by a woman who was suffering from a hemorrhage, or by touching someone who was dead, Jesus would have made himself ritually impure, unable to participate in temple worship until he was purified. But surprisingly, not only does Jesus break the rules about temple purity, but he reverses the normal order of things. When the unclean woman touches him, he is not made unclean. Rather, she is cured, and so made ritually acceptable. From from being defiled by touching a corpse, Jesus raises the young girl from the dead.

We have heard these stories so many times that we take them for granted. We expect Jesus to listen to the request of the Gentile. We expect Jesus to heal the woman. But at the time when the gospels were written, these stories would have had a certain shock value. Jesus behaved in ways that a good Jew was not supposed to behave. He challenged people's expectations about what it meant to be a good Jew.

In contrast, while we are shocked by this morning's story, Jesus' behavior would not have been shocking to people in his own world. It would have been considered inappropriate for a

woman, and particularly, a Gentile woman, to make such a request of a man who was a stranger to her, let alone a Jewish man. We see the disciples respond to her behavior in a manner that would have been perfectly understandable at the time. The disciples think she is a nuisance, and they want Jesus to get rid of her: "Send her away, for she is crying after us."

What surprises us today is that Jesus responds in a way that would not have surprised the people at the time, but that does surprise us because it is contrary to what we have come to expect from Jesus. We expect Jesus to break the rules, but this time he doesn't. Jesus, for once, does the conventional thing. He does not immediately grant her request. Rather, he at first ignores her. When she persists, he lets her know that as a Jew, he does not have anything to do with Gentiles. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When she still persists, he insults her. "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Why does Jesus act like this?

We can perhaps find a clue if we take into account that Jesus had two audiences in mind: one was the disciples, the other was the woman. There are many stories in the gospels in which the disciples ask Jesus to act as an intermediary. So in the story about the young boy with the loaves and the fishes, the disciples ask Jesus to send the crowds away. How can such a large crowd be fed with only a handful of bread and some fish? In another story, some women ask Jesus to bless their children, and the disciples try to send them away. In another story, the disciples ask Jesus who will be first in the Kingdom of heaven. A common theme in these stories is that the disciples are clueless, that they just don't understand what Jesus is all about.

But another theme that is common in these various stories is that Jesus does not always simply solve the problem right off the bat. He asks questions. He forces people to think. He

challenges their faith. So in the story of the loaves, when the disciples ask Jesus to send the crowd away, Jesus tells the disciples: "You give them something to eat." They then bring to him the five loaves and two fish, from which he feeds the crowd. When they ask "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven," he brings a small child and puts it in front of them. "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

In this morning's gospel, we have another example where the disciples are just too thick to understand what Jesus is about. By now, they should know that Jesus listens to the requests of women, even though Jewish men did not deal with unknown women. They should know that Jesus responds to the request of Gentiles, although Jews and Gentiles did not mix in Jewish culture. Still, the disciples do the typical disciple thing. They ask Jesus to send the woman away.

Jesus' second audience is the Canaanite woman. As we know from other stories, Jesus does not always respond right away to those who ask him for help. In John's gospel, there are several of these stories. There is the story of an official who asks Jesus to heal his sick son. At first, Jesus says, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe," but then he heals the son. When Jesus' mother asks Jesus to do something about the lack of wine at the wedding in Cana, he tells her that his time has not yet come. Then he turns water into wine. When Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, he begins the conversation with a simple request for water. It is only at the end of a long conversation that he offers her living water.

By at first refusing the woman's request, Jesus addresses both audiences. He tests the disciples, to find out whether they have really learned anything. At the end, he does honor their request. He sends her away, but not in the way they had wanted. He sends her away by healing her daughter. And he honors the woman's request as well. When she cleverly

responds to his insult of calling her a dog by pointing out that even the dogs get the crumbs that fall under the table, Jesus not only heals her daughter, but gives her his highest compliment: "O woman, great is your faith!" Scholars tells us that Jesus speaks this way about only one other person in the gospels, also a Gentile, the centurion whose son he healed. In contrast, Jesus often complains to his disciples that their faith is too small. Like the woman in Jesus' parable of the unjust Judge, the Canaanite woman persists in her certainty that her request will eventually be heard, and her faith is rewarded.

What, if any conclusions, might we draw for today? First, the disciples and the woman represent two groups of people who need to grow into faith, but in very different ways. The disciples are examples of people who think of themselves as strong in faith. They are certain of their status before God. As Jews, they know they are part of God's chosen people, and they know that, as a Gentile, this pesky woman is not. They are sufficiently confident of their good standing with Jesus that they ask him to honor their request: Get rid of this woman who is bothering us. Their faith can only grow by having its certainty challenged. They need to become uncertain. But in order for them to become uncertain, Jesus first has to honor their request, only later to show them that it was the wrong request all along.

The woman also needs to have her faith grow. But the woman represents those who are weak in faith, those who are uncertain in their relationship with God. She is a Gentile, not one of the chosen people. And she also makes a request of Jesus. In her case, Jesus at first appears to reject her request, only finally to have it granted. Her faith also needs to grow, but not by having it challenged. Rather, it must grow more certain. What at first appears to be a challenge to her faith, a refusal, turns out to be an answer to her request. Because she refuses to give up in her belief that

God will be good to her, God is eventually good to her.

Like the disciples, and like the Canaanite woman, our faith needs to grow. Sometimes, we are the strong, those who are certain of ourselves, and certain of God's ways in our lives, or the lives of others. We need to have our faith challenged, to learn that God is full of surprises, that God does not always meet our expectations. Sometimes God is more generous than our expectations.

Sometimes, we are the weak, fearing that God does not hear our prayers, that we are outcasts from God's good graces. We need to persevere, to allow our faith time to grow, to learn to know that God hears us, even when he seems distant, even when it seems our prayers are not answered. We may then find that our requests, are after all, granted.

Whether we are the strong, or whether we are the weak, we need to have our faith grow, so that we can also hear Jesus speak those words, "Great is your faith."

Finally, the passage also tells us something about how to read the Bible. We may approach the Bible the same way that the disciples approached Jesus, assuming that we know already what it is all about. Then when we come across a passage that does not meet our expectations we may become impatient, wishing it would simply go away, like the woman who told me she no longer reads the Bible because it is full of contradiction. We need to learn to approach the Bible like the Canaanite woman approached Jesus, knowing the littleness of our faith, but desperate for the help only it can offer. If at first we find the Bible seems deaf to our needs, we persevere, hanging in there knowing that if we are patient, the Bible may challenge our expectations, will force our faith to grow, and finally, will reward us in ways we could not have conceived.