

Pride is in direct opposition to God's nature. Jesus Christ, Who is the Revelation of God, is the opposite of arrogance and pride. This is demonstrated by His great self-emptying condescension in becoming incarnate for our sakes. Our Lord cultivates this woman's humility, and this is a great example for us.

How would you react to being called a dog? If the Canaanite woman had been full of pride, she would have gone back to her village and never having received anything from Christ, despite all her prayers. Her pride would have taken her away from God. People of prayer must be like this woman. How does she respond? "Lord," she says, "You say I'm a dog. You're right! That's the truth."

Do you see what Christ is doing? He leads her to give up all claim of personal merit. "Yes, I don't deserve the children's bread." It is difficult being brought to humility.

It is in vogue today in certain Orthodox circles for one to piously acknowledge his own sinfulness before others and admit to being "a wretched sinner." And if one actually has that self-image, revealed by the inexhaustible holiness of God, it can be a tremendous gift. But often such words are only an affectation. If you ever say to that person a word of criticism or correction, he will hate you. He will never forget it and hold it against you. He will defend himself and explain why you are wrong. He will bear a grudge against you for having said it. We can say this about ourselves, but if someone else calls us a dog, it is unacceptable!

We need to learn a lesson from this Canaanite woman and admit that we do not deserve what we ask for. We do not deserve it any more than a family pet deserves to get up on the kitchen table and join in Sunday dinner. The only way to approach Christ is in humility, trusting in His mercy and compassion.

Why is humility so important in prayer? Because when we really humble ourselves before God, we give up all our false hopes based upon our own merit. Then we can receive in His gifts in the only way that God offers them: through His grace and mercy.

*"Then Jesus answered and said to her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour."* (Mt. 15:28).

These are the words that Christ wanted to say all along! He loved this woman and He truly wanted to give her this gift, this miracle of love. He led her on this path to test her perseverance, her trust, and her humility in prayer. She did persevere: while God appeared to be ignoring her, she continued to pray. She trusted, believing that only a crumb from her Lord's table would work the great miracle that she needed and that only He could do it. She was humble: Christ said, "You don't deserve My help in this matter." And she quickly said, "You are right," abandoning any thought that anything that she did or that she was merited His help.

May God mold us in the form of this Canaanite woman – may He give us the strength to persevere, the faith to trust in Him, and the grace to grow in humility.



## Three Principles of Prayer

**“The only way to approach Christ is  
in humility, trusting in His mercy  
and compassion.”**

Homily given at All Saints Orthodox Church on  
the Sunday of the Canaanite Woman, 2009  
by Deacon David Keim.

## Gospel: Matt. 15:21–28

Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.” But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, “Send her away, for she cries out after us.” But He answered and said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” But He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.” And she said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

**I**n the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Have you ever felt like God is ignoring your prayers? Does it ever seem that, even though you pray fervently and piously, your prayers never get higher than the ceiling?

Of course, God is never moved by prayers that are contrary to His will for our salvation and our healing. But, even when we believe we are praying according to His will, it can feel like God is not answering. What do we do? Should we give up? Should we quit praying?

We have in this Gospel lection the account of Jesus’ encounter with a Canaanite woman, and she demonstrates what we should do when it seems like our prayer is fruitless. From her example, we can learn three important principles of prayer, especially when it seems that God is not listening.

The first principle is that of **perseverance**. The second is an **unshakable trust** in our Lord Jesus Christ, above all odds, and in spite of all evidence to the contrary. The third principle is **humility**.

### PERSEVERANCE

**T**his Canaanite woman would not take no for an answer; she would not quit. Nothing could dissuade her from seeking the Lord’s help. Somehow, she came to understand that Jesus was much more than just another Jewish teacher. She comes to Christ, and addresses Him as “Lord” and as “Son of David,” which was the Jewish way of referring to the Messiah, the Christ. And how does Jesus respond?

*“But He answered her not a word.”* (Mt. 15:23).

She acknowledged Him as Lord and Christ, but was completely ignored her! Jesus would not even speak to her!

Finally, His disciples grew tired of hearing her call after them and they asked Jesus to send her away. (Mt. 15:23). So, not only did Christ ignore her, but his followers said, “You are really making a nuisance of yourself. We would rather that you just leave.”

There was discouragement on every hand, but she persisted. And eventually Christ did say something to her.

*“But He answered and said, ‘I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’”* (Mt. 15:24).

Now, that must really have been discouraging. She was a Canaanite, not from Israel. What response could she give to this? Jesus has placed her in a position where she will have to rely entirely upon His mercy. She has no claim of right to anything. Nevertheless, she persevered. She fell at His feet and worshipped Him, crying, *“Lord, help me!”* Now, what does Christ do? He says the most discouraging thing of all!

*“It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.”* (Mt. 15:26).

God sometimes tests us to teach us this trait of perseverance. Sometimes God answers prayers right away. But, sometimes it seems that the more we pray, the more discouraging it is. God does not even say a word to us, or He says something discouraging. What do you do then? We need to do what this Canaanite woman did: she persevered! She wasn’t deterred by the disciples. Even the words that Christ said to her—which sounded very harsh—would not stop her.

### TRUST

**S**econdly, we must trust in God. Nothing could stop this Canaanite woman from trusting in Christ. She addressed Him from a heart of faith when she called Him Lord. She recognized in Him what so many refused to acknowledge: that He was the Son of David, that He was the Christ. It is essential to faith to know Who Jesus is, and to acknowledge Him as Lord and Christ. Because this woman understood Who Jesus is she trusted that He had the power to work a great miracle for her daughter, that He had the power to speak a word and her daughter would be delivered from the demon’s power.

Moreover, this woman trusted that even so great a miracle would not be difficult for Jesus. When Christ said to her that He shouldn’t give the children’s bread to the dogs, she responded, “But, all I need is a crumb.” She was asking for a miracle, but she understood the limitless power of God and that this was really just a small crumb. What faith and trust she had in Christ!

### HUMILITY

**T**hirdly, we can see from this account of the Canaanite woman, the importance of true humility. Being referred to as a “dog” sounds pretty harsh to our ears. But, in the Middle East in the first century, it was even worse. In that time and place a dog was not seen as an animal to be admired. They usually ran wild and ate garbage. They were unsightly, smelly, and mangy. To a Jew, being called a dog was a grave insult.

But this is what Jesus called the Canaanite woman, even though she acknowledged Him as the Christ, the Son of David, and as her Lord. Her response demonstrated great humility.