

THEY SAID YOU COULDN'T HAVE IT!

Today's Text: Matt. 15: 21-39

Extracts:

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 worshipped 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 [Matt. 15: 21-28]

Bill Burke is a retired corporate attorney who lives in Costa Mesa, California, USA.¹ An avid mountain climber, his burning desire was to reach the summit of Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world (29,035 feet or 5.5 miles high). In 2007, he stopped about 100 yards below the summit, fearing that he would not have the strength to return alive after making the final push to the top. In 2008, he tried again but had to be evacuated by helicopter after he began suffering from pulmonary edema. But in March 2009, he returned, beat all odds and reached the summit at the age of 67! On what motivated him to do it, he said, "I wanted to be the oldest American who ever stood on top."

Bill Burke could not be denied his heart's desire, not his age nor the harsh climatic conditions nor discouragement from people. His success has dwarfed past failures and fears. So what is your heart's desire right now? How are you pursuing it? Who or what is holding you back? Let us find out from this week's lesson.

¹ Story based on the following sources: "Costa Mesa Man, 67, Climbs Mount Everest," <http://cbs2.com/local/Summit.Mount.Everest.2.1018981.html> ; and "Oldest American to reach Everest summit returns home," <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/mount-burke-everest-2452042-home-year>

1. Ways by which you can have what you want

Recently, a family with young children took me home after the Sunday service because my wife had had to go elsewhere from church. On the way, we stopped to drop off their cousin that their four-year-old son was quite fond of. Their son wanted to come down with her to spend the afternoon there. Of course, his parents had other plans for the day and could not afford such luxury. They firmly turned down his request. Then, suddenly, he started crying. The more his request was turned down, the louder he cried but his parents had the final say on the matter. They drove off and he stopped crying.

The young child cried because he might have had his way on previous occasions through that method. Like most children, crying works for a time until their parents are no longer moved by it. In that case, they have to find more effective ways of having what they want. We all do a similar thing when we want something. We may not know whether what we want is good or bad for us. In general, we expect that those with authority over us will give us what is good but deny us what is bad. Jesus made the point during the Sermon on the Mount when He said, “What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” **[Matt. 7: 9-11]**.

We can obtain whatever we may need or desire through one or more of the following ways:

a) *We can work for it*

Paid employment is a good option to meet our needs because “if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” **[2 Thes. 3: 10]**. You can work for others or for yourself. However, there are many limitations here. For example, in view of the poor economic conditions, we may be willing and available to work but the jobs are not there. We may have jobs but the pay is *always* too low compared to our needs. On the other hand, some of us are too lazy to work. As a result, poverty comes to them “like a prowler” and their needs “like an armed man” **[Prov. 6: 11]**. Some other people are engaged in work that compromises their morality, such as prostitution, now respectably called sex-work. One day, as a result of aging, we have no choice but to retire from working, whereas our needs cannot be retired. We may enjoy some form of pensions but it cannot meet all our needs. Therefore, work is not sufficient to give us what we want.

b) *Or we can beg for it*

Begging is best described by the word, charity. Some of us live on charity provided by parents, siblings, the church or the state. Some people beg at

street corners. No matter how we beg, it also has its limitations. For example, some of us are too ashamed to beg [Lk 16: 3]. Much more, there is no relationship between beggars and their benefactors. A beggar may be grateful to his benefactor but he may not recognize him if he were to pass by him a few minutes later. Consequently, charity is an unstable means to satisfy your needs. It depends a great deal on the generosity of donors and benefactors whose purses are determined by economic circumstances.

c) *Or we can steal it*

Some people may not have the patience or disposition to work or to beg. So, they would prefer to steal- with the pen or the gun. With the global economic hardship, the spate of financial scams has gone up as the criminally-minded try to cash in on the greed of some people to cheat them out of their savings or resources. In recent times, we have seen security pictures taken of people trying to steal ATM machines! In some developing countries, public officers have perfected the art of converting public funds into their personal estates! In deed, the thief comes to steal or kill or destroy [Jn 10: 10]. But wealth gained by dishonesty will be diminished [Prov. 13: 11]. Consequently, stealing will not meet our desires for God “gives (the sinner) the work of gathering and collecting that he may give to him who is good before (Him)” [Eccl. 2: 26].

d) *But only by God’s grace can we have it!*

No human effort (by working or begging or stealing) can give us in full measure what we need. Only God can provide it, not by our merit but by His grace. For example, Moses reminded the children of Israel on the eve of their entering the Promised Land, that for forty years in the wilderness, God fed them with manna which they did not know where it came from, their garments did not wear on them nor did their feet swell so as to prove to them that “man shall not live by bread alone but man lives *by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord*” [Deut. 8: 1-4]. Therefore, when they became rich, they should not say in their hearts, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.” Instead, they should remember that it is God that gives us the power to get wealth *for His purpose* [vv. 17-18].

Grace means unmerited favour. Therefore, when God gives us grace, it must be for His purpose. This point was driven home to me in a recent sermon that I heard in my church. Hannah went with her husband, Elkanah, “yearly to worship and sacrifice to the Lord of hosts in Shiloh” but “Hannah had no children” [1 Sam. 1: 1-3]. Her husband’s other wife had children and taunted Hannah for her barrenness but she could not be consoled by her husband’s care and concern [vv. 4-6]. Year by year, she went to Shiloh apparently to pray for a child but nothing happened. But one year, she changed her prayer. She made a vow with God that,

if He gave her a male child, she would give him to the Lord *all the days of his life and no razor would come upon his head* [vv.10-11].

God was looking for a prophet for Israel. Hannah was looking for a son for herself, to save her from shame. There was no meeting point between both positions. So, year by year, she prayed and she remained barren. Then the last year, Hannah offered her yet-to-be-conceived son to God for His purpose! The tyre (tire) had met the road and the car would certainly run. God gave her Samuel. As soon as he was weaned, she took him to the house of God at Shiloh and “lent him to the Lord” [vv. Vv. 12-28]. In return, God granted her request, an unmerited favour, and she bore three sons and two daughters [1 Sam. 2: 21]! They said that she could not have children but she did! Let us learn more about this principle from this week’s Bible text.

2. A Gentile woman seeks an unmerited favour from Jesus

Jesus came to the region of Tyre and Sidon, coastal cities on the Mediterranean Sea in Phoenicia. A Gentile woman from Canaan in that same region heard of Him and decided to bring her personal problems to His attention. Her daughter was “severely demon-possessed.” She came and cried out to Jesus, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” He answered her not a word [Matt. 15: 21-23]. That was an unusual response from the usually compassionate Jesus. She called Him by His Messianic name. Yet, He did not respond. Something was missing. Let us pay attention to the following principles that we can learn from this story:

a) *Was she asking for charity or unmerited favour?*

What the woman was asking for was little compared to what Jesus did for multitudes a little while after this story. When He had left the woman and skirted the Sea of Galilee, there came to Him great multitudes, “having with them the lame, blind, mute, maimed, and many others.” They laid them before His feet and “He healed them” [vv. 29-30]. Moreover, He had compassion on them and with seven loaves of bread and a few little fish, He miraculously fed four thousand men, besides women and children. After that, He sent the multitudes away [vv. 32-39].

When those multitudes saw the miracles, they “glorified the God of Israel” {v. 31} but did they develop a relationship with Jesus? I doubt because elsewhere, after Jesus had miraculously fed five thousand men, more multitudes came looking for Him. When they could not find Him in Capernaum, they took boats and came to the other side of the sea where they found Him. They said to Him, “Rabbi, when did You come here?” He replied them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, *not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.* Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to

everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him” [Jn 6:1-27].

The woman was a Gentile and Jesus did not answer her because He was “not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” [Matt. 15: 24]. In other words, His earthly ministry was to plant the seed of the kingdom of God among the Jews and His disciples would be the ones to spread the good news to the rest of the world [Matt. 28: 19; Acts 1: 8]. Therefore, for the foreigner to benefit from His ministry at the time, she was asking for unmerited favor, not mere charity. She had to do what Jesus was looking for, just as Hannah did what God was looking for.

b) *But Jesus was looking for people of faith!*

You will recall that when Peter doubted and began to sink as he approached Jesus walking on water during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus said to him, “O you of little faith; why did you doubt?” [Matt. 14: 31]. At the end of the Parable of the Unjust Judge, illustrating why men ought to pray and not lose heart, Jesus concluded, “When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” [Lk 18: 8]. So, in our relationship with Jesus, faith in Him is the way to God’s grace for “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” [Acts 2: 21].

The Gentile woman was seeking for her daughter’s healing from Jesus, an unmerited favour to the non-Jews at the time. The only way for her to get it was to show her faith. Jesus tested it by “pretending” not to hear her. He did not answer her a word. Did she give up? No! Instead, she became a thorn in His flesh. His disciples complained, “Send her away, *for she cries out after us*” [Matt. 15: 23]. She was neither afraid nor ashamed. She would not take no for an answer!

Jesus raised the stakes. He “insulted” her by saying that it was not good to give the children’s bread to the little dogs [v. 26]. That is where most of us would give up, saying, “After all, who does He think He is?” She persisted and replied the Lord that even the little dogs eat the crumbs from the master’s table [v. 27]. At that point, Jesus knew that she was qualified for the unmerited favour for her daughter’s healing. Jesus said to her, “O woman, *great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.*” That very hour, her daughter was healed [v. 28]. Who said she could not have it?

From the foregoing, we see that the Gentile woman could not access God’s favour by righteousness under the Law (of Moses) but she obtained it by faith in Christ, the only begotten Son of God. That makes her a model for today’s true believer.

3. Conclusion: You are saved by grace for good works!

The word of God says, “For *by grace you have been saved through faith*, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any one should boast; for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” [**Eph. 2: 8-9**]. That means that Christ’s atoning death on the cross is *available* to all of mankind but only those who believe and accept it will be saved. Therefore, by grace, God will do for you what you cannot do for yourself but by faith, you must stand up to take advantage of it. That was what Hannah did. That was what the Gentile woman did. Both of them were abundantly rewarded. They gave to God what He wanted. He gave them their hearts’ desires.

What does God expect of you after giving your life to Christ? He expects you to give up sin and become transformed [**Rom. 12: 1-2**]. Audit your pending list of prayer requests and heart’s desires right now. How does each relate to God’s purposes and plans for your life in Christ Jesus? What relationship do you have and continue to have with the Lord that will motivate Him to bring your requests to His Father?

They said you couldn’t have it. Surprise them!