

PATRICIA BATTEN

Parenting *by* Faith

What Jesus Said
to Parents



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To the boys whom God has entrusted to us—
Jack, Sam, and Tim—
for the times you refused to change your socks for
weeks on end; for the eight times you broke your
glasses in one year; for the time you rode your
bicycle over the retaining wall.

You increased my faith in God.

You also showed me I could love more than I ever
thought possible. You make my heart sing.

Every single day.



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Introduction

When my ten-year-old son emptied his locker at the end of the school year, he brought home stacks of loose papers, pointless pencils without erasers, a multitude of reusable water bottles, enough granola-bar crumbs to feed our family of five for months on end, and a plastic cup filled with colored beads. We determined which items were destined for the landfill and which would be recycled for new and exciting purposes. I was stuck on the beads.

"What's the cup of beads for?" I asked.

"I won those during class competitions," he said.

"Good job, Jack! You have a lot of beads here. You must have done well," I said with a proud smile.

"Actually..." he began, "the very best students got trophies made by the teacher. The kids who did really well but didn't win first place were given ocean shells. The kids who did so-so got colored rocks. I got beads."

I peered through the plastic cup. I didn't see any shells or colored rocks mixed in with the beads. I swirled the cup with my wrist like I do with my iced coffee. No rocks. No shells.

"Did you get beads every time?" I asked.

"No. I got a colored rock *once*," he said while thrusting his hand to the depths of his backpack. He yanked out a shiny white stone.

"My teacher had to give it to me because I was on the winning kickball team. Everyone scored except for me."

An anemic "Oh," was all I could muster. Do you know that "oh"? It's a gut-wrenching, lump-in-your-throat, pit-in-your-stomach "oh" that dribbles off your lips in slow motion.

Jack and I were quiet for a long, exaggerated moment. My hands started sweating. The plastic cup pressed deep into my palm, slipping ever so slightly against my skin.

I knew this mother-son episode could play out in one of two ways: with tears or with laughter. Hoping that my little boy would see the ridiculousness of viewing oneself through the foggy lens of a plastic cup, I tried for laughter by stating the obvious.

Staring into the cup, I broke the ice with a chuckle. I nodded my head and said with raised eyebrows, "That's a *lot* of beads."

He caught on to the absurdity of the situation and laughed. "Yeah, it *is* a lot!" he echoed, with a broad, genuine smile.

Jack saw the humor in this real-life story that sounded more like a plotline ripped out of a tween novel. A bunch of beads can't define us. We laughed. We *really* laughed. I'm grateful that he knows he has strengths in other areas and that he can't be defined by a cup of craft refuse. As a mother in Christ and as a kid in Christ, we both knew that our value comes from Christ alone.

But as a parent, I still had to contend with the sweaty plastic cup filled with beads. I saw a few options. One would have been for Jack to keep the cup of beads on his desk to encourage him to do better next time. Another choice would have been to take the beads and make something better or beautiful out of them—a necklace or a craft stick picture frame. A third alternative would have been to hold a ceremonial "tossing of the beads."



We parents are faced with decisions every day. When our kids come home with a cup of beads, what do we do with them? Is there a *Christian* response? Does the Bible speak to the fears and anxieties of parents?

As a pastor and seminary professor, I've spent a fair amount of time studying the Gospels. Yet I never raised the question, "What does Jesus say to *parents*?" I glanced through the Gospels with fresh eyes and began seeing his interactions with parents scattered among the pages.

In most cases, parents—at their wits' end—approach Jesus in desperate need of his help. These are mothers and fathers who love their children, but their kids are slipping away—because of sickness, disease, or demon-possession. Maybe in your case it's drugs or defiance or a medical diagnosis. Whatever it might be, your child is slipping away.

I've scoured the Gospels in search of uncovering what, if anything, Jesus says to parents when their kids are clenching a handful of colored beads. He speaks very few words, but the words he says are powerful. To a desperate outsider he says, "You have great faith." To a father who struggles with faith, "Everything is possible for one who believes." To the widow of Nain he says, "Don't cry."

But Jesus speaks these words to us, too.

To my surprise, I discovered that the reasons parents approached Jesus in New Testament times are really no different from the reasons why parents approach Jesus today. The specific issues may be different, but the underlying emotions and anxieties, the driving fears, are identical. We're worried about our kids. We want the best for them. We don't know what to do. Or stated another way: We don't know what to do with the beads; we want our kids to have trophies.

There is no record in the Gospels of Jesus ever telling the mothers and fathers *why* their children are suffering. And believe it or not, the parents never raise that question. They simply want Jesus. Maybe that's because when you're standing at the edge of a parenting abyss, you realize that's all you really need. Jesus. He sees. He speaks. He listens. He touches. *He is present among parents.*

After seeing how compassionate Jesus is toward these mothers and fathers in the Gospels, I was surprised at how incredibly loved I felt by the Lord. God cares about parents. God cares about our children. And God still speaks to the needs of mothers and fathers today.

As you read through this book and reflect on the questions at the end of each chapter, my prayer is that you would know that, too: that your trust in the Lord would increase as you begin to comprehend his enormous love for you in this crucial task of parenting. In the process, you might find that you've been carrying around a few beads of your own. My joyful hope is that you'll gain the wisdom to know what to do with the beads and the trophies—and everything in between.

CHAPTER 1



Feasting on Crumbs of Mercy

Matthew 15:21–28

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

“Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.



What Jesus said to parents:
You have great faith.

Chasing Crumbs

We had ants. Because we had crumbs. We had crumbs. Because we had kids. We got rid of the ants, but we kept the kids and the crumbs. Every parent knows that crumbs are inevitable. But no parent wants them in the house.

We have been blessed with three incredible kids. They're also crumbly. Incredibly crumbly. We know which child was sitting in which seat just by examining the evidence. Toasted plain bagel with cream cheese is the trademark crumb of the oldest child. Macaroni, cemented to the floor by an orange cheese-like substance, is the work of the middle one. The youngest child leaves behind the most evidence. It's on his seat, around his seat, stuck in the crevices on the table, smashed into the floor, spattered on his face, and strewn throughout his fine locks of yellow hair. He parades through the house, a trail of crumbs falling like fairy dust from the folds of his shirt and pants. I chase crumbs all day long. I could make crumb cake for dinner every night with the morning's dustpan collection.



In Matthew 15, the gospel writer records the plight of a woman who chases after crumbs. But she's chasing and embracing, not sweeping them away.

Why? Because she knows that Jesus can make a feast of mercy out of crumbs. And she's hungry for mercy. Because her life is crumbling.

Jesus' Bite Is Bigger Than His Bark

It's a strange passage in Scripture. We're dealing with demons, dogs, and disciples with deep prejudice. We're looking at bread crumbs and a crummy situation. We're dealing with a broken-hearted, exhausted mother, who begs Jesus for mercy. And then we have a Jesus who

doesn't seem to care. The disciples advise Jesus to ignore her. Jesus says his mission is aimed at the lost sheep of Israel, not outsiders. She persists. He insults her. Jesus gives a mother in distress a difficult time. But by the end of the incident, Jesus says to this mother: "You have great faith!"

You read it, and you might feel ashamed. Jesus' words in this passage are tough, shocking. These aren't the words of my Sunday school Jesus. Here's a Gentile—a non-Jewish woman—who desperately needs help, but Jesus says his mission is to help Jews, the chosen children, *not* the two-bit Gentile *dogs* of Syrophenicia.

It's certainly not my place to advise Jesus. But I want to. I want to tell him to excuse himself from the situation *politely*. No harm done. But don't insult the woman! What are we to make of this bizarre interaction?

Passage Prep for Parents

- Describe a time when you were confused by Jesus or maybe even hurt by other Christians.
- Who might you describe as having great faith?
- The cry for mercy is a prominent refrain in the Psalms, but according to the Gospels, who else cries out for mercy? (For an example, look up Matthew 9:27.)
- There are only two instances in Matthew's gospel in which a woman addresses Jesus. This passage is the first. The other occurs in Matthew 20:20–21 and is made by the mother of James and John. In both instances, a mother takes the initiative in approaching Jesus. Why are both of these instances highly unusual actions for women at the time?

God's Commitment to Mercy: Members Only?

The Israelites were God's chosen people. There was no doubt about that. They were set apart from other nations to follow God and love and worship him alone. Moses said to the assembly: "Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession" (Deuteronomy 14:2). It may sound strange that God would choose one group of people over another, but God's setting apart of the Jews demonstrates his kindness, not his cruelty. God's desire was for a nation that would be a blessing to other nations. When God called Abram and promised to make him into a great nation, God also promised that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).

The Jews were not chosen because of how wonderful they were. They were chosen because of God's mercy: his kindness. So it makes sense that when God became incarnate, he took up flesh and bones among his chosen people in Israel. Jesus' ministry was focused on the Jews. He preached to Jews. He ate with Jews. He healed Jews. *Most of the time.*

Missions of Mercy for Nonmembers

There were occasions in which Jesus ministered to non-Jews, or Gentiles. And whenever a Gentile was healed, Jesus healed *from a distance*.¹ He did it with a word, not a touch.

But this lack of touch didn't mean lack of heart.

The heartbeat of God's mission was among his chosen people in Israel; but here and there, he embarked on a mission of healing and grace into Gentile lives and into Gentile lands, softening the center of hardened heathen hearts. When the time was right, the church would be unleashed to fan those flames and set those souls ablaze for Jesus Christ.

One mission crossed the cultural divide and entered foreign territory. It penetrated the life of a little girl and her desperate mom. It was a mission of mercy.

Mercy for a Mother

And mercy is exactly what this mother needs. She begs Jesus: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”² Have mercy—*on me*. She doesn’t say “Have mercy” or “Have mercy on my daughter.” This mother needs mercy because watching her child suffer is more than she can handle.

Parents know what it’s like to care for someone hard and long, with everything they’ve got. Mothers in the twenty-first century know why this first-century mom needed mercy.

Mercy for Breaks

When our oldest son was eight years old, we brought him to the doctor to have his legs and feet examined. He was pigeon-toed. Running was a struggle for him, and he often fell for no reason at all. Doctors at Boston Children’s Hospital determined that he wasn’t pigeon-toed. Instead, he had femoral anteversion. His legs were set at the wrong angle in his hips. I remember the white-knuckled car ride home from the city. I asked, “How do you feel about the diagnosis?” He paused for a moment before replying, “I guess that’s why I’m not very good at sports, and I guess that’s why I fall a lot. Now at least I know there’s a reason.”

Femoral anteversion is a condition you can live with. Surgery is elective. But when you’re ten years old and you fall in the middle of the hallway at school, or you trip over and over again in front of your peers at gym class, or you’re permanently “It” in the game of tag, it becomes a condition you really can’t live with.

So...we broke our son’s legs. Both of them. Okay, we didn’t do it. A surgeon at Boston Children’s Hospital did it. But we allowed it. In layman’s terms, Jack’s legs were crooked. Now they’re straight.

I realized right away that I would need mercy to endure his

recovery. Five non-weight-bearing weeks in a wheelchair, followed by another five weeks with the wheelchair, followed by a couple of weeks shuffling around on a borrowed walker with the name Agnes imprinted on the front bar, followed by several weeks of leaning on a cane. Yes, he needed mercy. But I needed it, too, because watching a child suffer is absolutely heart-wrenching. And caring for a child with serious needs can leave you drained, dry, and depleted.

Mercy for Brakes

On Jack's first day home from the hospital, we discovered that those levers beneath the wheelchair handles were not, indeed, brakes. Although they looked like they belonged on the handlebars of a child's bicycle, they were, in fact, the complete opposite of brakes. They were release levers. Yes. Release levers. When little brother (toddler Timmy) depressed the "brakes," the back of Jack's seat came crashing down. While Jack was leaning against it, of course.

I needed mercy.

I needed mercy after our first outdoor adventure. It was just one little step to enter the house. My husband said, "Don't worry. I'll pop a wheelie." I gave him one of those dads-are-crazy kind of looks, and I said in a moms-know-everything kind of voice, "I'll just lift the front of the wheelchair a tiny bit to get over the bump." I grabbed hold of the leg rests and lifted, because "pop a wheelie" sounded like something you'd do on a bike with brakes, not a wheelchair with levers. But to my surprise, I learned that those lovely little leg rests actually move when you lift them. Jack's two broken legs got a shocking jolt upward. He screamed. I stepped aside. Rich popped a wheelie. We got in the house.

I was a mom in need of mercy.

Have Mercy on Me

The mother in our passage cannot sleep at night. She needs mercy. She doesn't toss and turn in bed, counting sheep. Instead, she counts the number of times her daughter has turned to self-harm. When her daughter screams in fits of rage, contorting her face so that she's unrecognizable, this mother needs mercy. When this little girl withdraws deep within and her stare is hollow, this mother needs mercy. When neighbors and passersby snicker or move to the other side of the road to shield their own *normal* children, this mother needs mercy. When her daughter cries at night because she is confused and scared, this mother needs mercy, because she does not know how to comfort her daughter and make everything okay.

What mother hasn't asked for mercy? She needs the merciful hand of God on her as she raises her little girl. Have mercy on *me*.

Mercy for an Outsider

But she's not asking for mercy as a mother alone. She's asking for mercy as a *Gentile* mother. A non-Jewish woman.

In the Bible, mercy is seen as a quality of God, his kindness lavished on his chosen people. God's mercy meant that

- God faithfully kept his promises
- God maintained his relationship with his chosen people
- God was faithful, even when his people were unworthy and unfaithful

Mercy has to do with his compassion, his loving-kindness. It's the outflow of God's love for his people. God continued to love them, even when they did not deserve it.

But this woman is a foreigner. There is no reason for her to expect mercy. She is not an "approved" recipient of mercy. She's asking

for some of the mercy that God bestows on his chosen people. She wants some of the loving-kindness, some of the compassion, some of the pity that God gives to the Israelites. She wants him to act on her behalf. Could she, a Gentile, benefit from the overflow of God's mercy? Were there any crumbs for her? "Have mercy on *me!*" she says. *Me*, a mother. *Me*, a *Gentile*.

The Syrophoenician woman was entrenched in a system of deep-rooted racial prejudice. Her exact experience is not shared by every parent today, but there are ways in which present-day parents feel unchosen, inadequate, living life on the fringes. These parents cry out for mercy:

- "Have mercy on me, a mother with anxiety."
- "Have mercy on me, a father in a messy marriage."
- "Have mercy on me, a parent in financial crisis."
- "Have mercy on me, a single parent."

Not every parent feels a strong sense of "otherness" like the Syrophoenician woman does. But there are some. Many of these parents cry out for mercy in our world:

- "Have mercy on me, an immigrant mother."
- "Have mercy on me, a parent with an addiction."
- "Have mercy on me, the father of a child with special needs."

Mercy for a *Despised Outsider*

This story is recorded in two gospel accounts: Matthew (15:21–28; provided at the beginning of this chapter) and Mark (7:24–30). Both writers want their readers to know loud and clear that this woman is a foreigner and is outside of God's covenant people. People see her as being outside of God's mercy. Mark refers to her as "a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia" (verse 26). Matthew chooses the

designation “Canaanite” (verse 22)—odd, because, well, there were no Canaanites in New Testament times. In fact, this is the only time the word *Canaanite* is used in the New Testament, though it was often used in the Old Testament.

So why does Matthew use the outdated, seemingly irrelevant term? Because the word *Canaanite* conjured up a certain image and brought back a flood of dismal memories for his audience of Jewish readers. Yes, it meant *foreigner*; but it also meant *enemy*.

When God brought the Israelites into the promised land after Moses died, the land was already inhabited. By Canaanites. God told the Israelites that the Canaanites must go. They worshiped idols. They practiced temple prostitution and were the most sexually depraved religion in ancient times. They even practiced human sacrifice. The first two commandments God gave to his chosen people were in direct opposition to the religion of the Canaanites:

- “You shall have no other gods before me,” and
- “You shall not make for yourself an [idol]” (Exodus 20:3–4).

God warned the Israelites against becoming like the Canaanites around them. But their tangible religion of wood and stone carvings proved too much for God’s chosen people. They wanted something they could see with their eyes and feel with their hands. And Israel’s leaders led them down a path of polytheism, thereby breaking God’s commandments.

Parental Hedge Betting

Most of the Israelites didn’t deny God, but they added to him. *Just in case*. Just in case God wasn’t strong enough; just in case God wasn’t kind enough; just in case God wasn’t smart enough; just in case God wasn’t good enough; just in case God didn’t care or wasn’t watching; just in case God wasn’t sufficient.

They were hedging their bets. Hedges are trees and shrubs that are used as borders in order to limit the size of an area. Over time, the word *hedge* came to refer to *limiting risk*. One way to limit risk was to diversify debt across many lenders instead of being beholden to one single lender.

When we as parents *hedge our bets* with God, we're not trusting him entirely with our children. We're adding to him—just in case. On the outside, this parental addition or diversification may manifest itself as determination, careful planning, information gathering, or perhaps having knowledge of the latest trends and trendsetters and Twitter feeds. Nothing is wrong with thoughtful, knowledgeable, informed parenting. In fact, it's good! Problems arise when on the inside, heart attitudes reveal avoidance of deep trust in God. Fueling our distrust are fears that he is not strong enough, smart enough, good enough, and caring enough.

Searching for the God of Mercy

This Canaanite woman is from a people who worshiped gods unlike the one true God. Canaanite gods were selfish and violent. They were unreliable and untrustworthy. They weren't *real*. And phony gods can't give mercy.

And guess who knows that? This Canaanite woman. She's looking for a God of mercy—for *the* God of mercy. Even though she's not one of the chosen.

When Matthew identifies the woman as a Canaanite, he implies that she's more than a foreigner. She's someone to steer clear of. She is the enemy of ages past. She's dangerous. She's your downfall. Matthew basically says, "Once a Canaanite, always a Canaanite." The disciples don't see a hurting mother; they see an idol-worshiper. Every Jew knew that the Canaanites with their idol worship were the Israelites' downfall, all the way to the exile, so they see her as an enemy. And enemies don't deserve mercy.