

# Pursuing Prayer

by Stewart Ruch

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*Developing a prayer muscle through challenges and silence is essential to pursuing a deeper relationship with Jesus.*

**Duration:** 29:19

**Scripture:** Matthew 15:28

**Topics:** "Prayer"

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## Description

In this sermon, Bishop Stuart Ruck shares his experience of learning mountain biking with his son and draws parallels to our relationship with Jesus. He reflects on the excitement and challenges of the sport, emphasizing the need to develop our muscles and muscle memory. Bishop Ruck relates this to our spiritual journey, highlighting the importance of building our faith muscle through prayer and deepening our relationship with Jesus. He encourages us to embrace the challenges and confusion that may come, as Jesus uses them to strengthen our faith and invite us to press in closer to Him.

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## Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. This week's sermon is by Bishop Stuart Ruck and is part three of Teach Us to Care and Not to Care, a three-part series on prayer. This summer, my ten-year-old son, Nathaniel, learned a new sport, the sport of mountain biking.

So, as he is learning this, I'm also getting really interested in this, and we actually spent Friday, I know that there aren't, for Coloradoans and East Coast folks, mountains, I understand, but we spent Friday in the mountains of Wisconsin. First time I'd ever really mountain biked, and I have a few conclusions. My first conclusion is, it is extremely fun.

You really can't stop thinking about it once you've done it. You close your eyes, and you think about yourself on the trail, and in my case, following my son, with a level of terror and excitement that is commingled and very engaging. Second conclusion, I have a lot more to learn about mountain biking, and I want to.

I want to read about it. I want to understand kind of how you do certain things and how you develop certain skills. Third conclusion, my muscles have a lot to learn still about mountain biking.

They really have to be developed if I'm going to continue to do this and learn this new sport with Nathaniel. I need to develop my muscles. You have to develop muscle memory.

You have to develop strength in new areas. They actually have to get better at what I need for them to get better, so that I can mountain bike better. The many things where we actually need our muscles to get better.

If you're an artist of any kind, you know the importance of muscle, how you hold your paintbrush, how you play violin. If you're an actor, you depend on what's called muscle memory as you seek to memorize a Shakespeare monologue and then present it. If you're an athlete, then you know how important muscle memory is and how you do repeat after repeat after repeat to develop and strengthen and tune your muscle.

So my opening question as we look at this really unique passage about the Canaanite woman is how is your prayer muscle? How developed is your prayer muscle? One way to get to an answer on that would be how do you do when you pray and you don't get a response right away? How do you do when you pray and you actually feel like you're met more by God's silence than God's presence? How do you do when you pray and you actually get a response, but it's really a response that you don't like? How do you respond emotionally? How do you respond spiritually? How strong, how developed, how mature is your prayer muscle? Having a developed prayer muscle will help you to care very much about certain things, the things of the kingdom of God, and actually care very little about other things that the kingdom of God itself does not prioritize. As a matter of fact, the series has been called, coming out of a T.S. Eliot poem, Teach Me to Care and Not to Care as a way of thinking about prayer. In prayer, we care deeply about certain things that matter deeply to Jesus and the kingdom of God, and we actually, in that passion and caring, leave other things behind as we develop our prayer muscle.

We're going to work primarily from Matthew chapter 15. This passage, I realize, is not explicitly about prayer, but it is about pursuit. Indeed, what we see in the Canaanite woman is the strength, the toughness to pursue Jesus.

And the title of the sermon is Pursuit Prayer, that as we develop a prayer muscle, we are able to pursue Jesus with a kind of endurance, a kind of perseverance that is required in so many parts of life to mature, and is certainly required in the spiritual life and the prayer life. Three key things as we seek to learn pursuit prayer, as we seek to develop our prayer muscle out of Matthew chapter 15. First, build faith muscle.

Second, don't let silence scare you off. Third, engage Jesus as a divine person, but as a person. Build faith muscle, don't let silence scare you off, engage Jesus as a divine person, but as a person.

Okay, quick note, here's what's hard about teaching on this. Is that this pushes into an area for us in our own Christian lives that we may not be as familiar with. It's an area that I would call holy toughness.

If you've heard me teach and preach, and some of you are brand new to Res, some of you are brand new to Christianity, you're exploring Christianity, other of you have been here a long time, I will often teach on the importance of receiving from Jesus. I love to quote Mary, the mother of Jesus, be it done unto me according to your will. I talk about the importance of being in a receptionist place and receiving his love.

I talk about how he first loved us before we loved him. He first chose us before we chose him. All of that is true.

There's a gentleness to Jesus, there's a sweetness to Jesus, but Jesus is a full reality. There is also a toughness to Jesus, there's also a challenge to Jesus, and if we don't get into that understanding of the fullness of who God is, we'll be extremely confused by the life of prayer and the toughness that needs to be a part of our life of prayer. Indeed, if we don't have a particular developed prayer muscle, we will stop praying, and we need to understand how Jesus interacts with so many in ways that would surprise us if we only have the sweetness paradigm and not the muscle toughness paradigm.

Jesus is both. God is both. Let's look at Matthew 15.

Okay, this is an incredible passage. I hope when it was read that you were tracking with it, and I hope as you were tracking with it, you went, I don't know why Jesus just did that, because that would tell me that you're tracking. Then you went, I don't know why he just reacted that way or didn't react that way.

Did he just say something about dogs? Whoa, really? What's happening there? Well, to get an idea of what's happening there, it's actually a total fair game to go to the end of the story. It's often important in Scripture. If you're reading a novel, it might ruin the novel, but when you're studying a text, you're studying a passage in Scripture, you want the full study, the full passage, and you need to understand often what happens at the end to get what's going on at the beginning.

That's part of learning how to read the Bible. So as we read the Bible, we see actually that at the end, he says, oh woman, great is your faith, be it done to you as you desire. Okay, so whoa, whoa, whoa.

So one thing we know is that we actually have a portrait of faith. We have somebody who is building their faith muscle, and we have somebody who is being celebrated for her faith. We need to keep that paradigm in mind as we press in.

What is Jesus doing besides celebrating her faith at the end? Well, first of all, he has a woman who's crying out. The word there actually speaks of crying and crying and crying in a repeated fashion. She's crying so much that the disciples are responding to her, and what does Jesus do first to her cries? He's silent.

He says not a word. Well, but wait, sir, I thought you taught from James chapter four last week that God draws near to those who draw near to him. Isn't she drawing near to him? Why is Jesus silent? All right? Another push in from the Canaanite woman, and then Jesus is very focused.

I've come for the house of Israel. She's not the house of Israel. She comes from a culture that has been ancient enemies of Israel, the Canaanites.

All right? Now it goes from silence to focus. Then he goes from focus to some kind of really interesting interaction. He's probably pulled a saying that's well known.

It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. The Gentiles could be, at times, be called the dogs. It is not, by the way, you've got to work your mind culturally, it is not the same as somebody calling, particularly a woman, a dog in our culture.

That is not what's happening, but that's not to say that we scrub it all clean. There is a pushback from Jesus in using a saying of the time in which he is saying, you're a Gentile. You're an enemy of Israel.

Would I really give you or would I really feed you? There is a pushback from Jesus. We can't make that go away. All right? That's what we see Jesus doing.

What's the Canaanite woman doing? Behold a Canaanite woman, verse 22. So behold is telling us that Matthew wants to say this is a really important story. Behold the Canaanite woman.

I'm about to introduce you to a hero. I'm about to introduce you to a hero of faith. He does that because the hero of faith is absolutely who his readers would think is the enemy of faith.

She's an ancient, represents an ancient enemy of Israel, the Canaanites, pagan worshipers, those who did unspeakable things to their own bodies and to children and to the nation of Israel. Behold, a Canaanite woman. Yet, this Canaanite woman somehow, somehow has learned that she addresses Jesus as the son of David, more, by the way, than the house of Israel is ever willing to do.

Where she learned that, how she learned that, we don't know. But she addresses him son of David. That's a way of honoring Jesus.

She calls him Lord. She doesn't mean what we would say as Lord, understanding the resurrection and the crucifixion of Jesus, but she does mean high respect. She does mean I'm engaging somebody, a rabbi, a person of standing, and I know that he has profound significance.

He's the son of David who was the kind of high king of Israel. She comes with what? With faith. It may not be a lot of faith, but she initially comes with faith.

So we see her doing that. We see that she has an intractable problem. Her daughter has a demon.

So her daughter is under a supernatural oppression. That may mean that her daughter has physical manifestations from this demon. It may mean that she has mental manifestations from this demon.

So she has no other option. She has nowhere else to go. As long as she can put all of her options at the table and say, I've got eight different ways I can handle this demon problem, and I'm going to just try one after another trial and error.

No. She's desperate. She's driven.

She's driven to pursuit and into prayer of pursuit because she has no other option. Those who are demonized today, and let's be really clear. Demonization happened in the ancient Near East.

Demonization happens in the western suburbs of Chicago. Numerous stories here at Resurrection of people being freed from the demonic and demonic activity. Numerous stories.

And when you're under that kind of oppression and that kind of duress or other kinds of oppression or other kinds of duress, you realize I have no other option but to pursue Jesus. I have even a little bit of faith, but I'm bringing that little bit of faith, son of David. What else do we see about the Canaanite woman? She's tough.

She just displays a kind of personality toughness. She gets silence from Jesus, then she gets focus from Jesus, doesn't include her, then she gets a saying from Jesus, and she keeps coming back. She is determined to get to Jesus.

Yes, she wants an answer for her daughter, but she also really wants Jesus. There's a toughness to the Canaanite woman that I believe is given to us as a kind of heroism to be emulated. And finally, this is important, it's likely that she's keeping a sense of humor, which humor can often be a sign of a kind of toughness and a kind of security of knowing who one's self is.

Humor kind of shows that there's a bigger thing going on in my life, and I can laugh at myself, I can laugh at others. She's not easily offended. By the way, just before this in Matthew 15, Jesus is interacting with religious leaders, and he's talking with them, and they get offended, and afterwards his disciples come to him and they say, wow, they were easily offended.

That kind of describes how religious leaders can be. In contrast, we now meet the Canaanite woman, who Jesus goes after way more kind of assertively and challenging than he did the religious leaders, and she's not offended. As a matter of fact, he says, well, you know, we wouldn't give the bread of the table, the children's bread, and throw it to the dogs.

She responds by saying, yes, Lord, title of honor, yes, Lord, but in the actual phrasing is even the little dogs get little crumbs from a little table. I don't know if I'd have a sense of humor at that point, right? I mean, do you have a sense of humor in your prayer life? I mean, do you ever feel like you and Jesus are kind of going back and forth, and maybe there's even a little bit of teasing happening? I'll get to this more in a moment, but you're engaging a person. Jesus had a sense of humor that was part of his personhood.

Another part of Jesus' personhood is that he is a kind of coach. He's like a faith coach. What he is doing in this interaction with the Canaanite woman is he is seeking to build her faith muscle.

So he's giving her workouts, if you will. She comes to this incredible need, and he's silent, not because he's rejecting her, because he's seeing, is she coming? Is she going to come farther? Will she run a little bit harder? Oh, yeah, she'll run a little bit harder. Boom.

She's right there again. She keeps crying out. He says, well, no, I came to the house of Israel, another workout, another faith workout.

How much does she believe in me? He's testing her faith. How much does she trust in me? How much does she believe that I really am the son of David? Oh, she comes back again. What Jesus is doing is like a faith coach work.

I could look back at some master coaches and master teachers I had, and here's a combination that they had, and I've watched this with my children as they've grown in athletics and education and art. A master coach, a master teacher can do two things at one time. They can be absolutely challenging, so they give you assignments, they give you opportunities, they give you workouts, so you feel like this is going to break me, and yet absolutely connected in that challenge.

So you feel like, I want to do this for them. They actually believe that I can do this. They know me well enough then to challenge me.

It's a key in parenting as well. Deep intimate knowledge of the child with incredible challenge of the child. Whoa.

What happens there? A burn happens there. A challenge happens there. How can I? Can I do this? They think I can do this.

I can do this. Thank God for the cross-country coach I had who actually really cared about me. But he also really cared that I become a better runner, and he gave me brutal workouts where it was a relief to throw up at the end of practice.

Right? Thank God for Mrs. Richardson, my junior high school teacher, who taught me how to write, the ardor of learning how to write. That's because she loved us. Right? Jesus is like that.

Jesus wants to build your faith muscle because he knows peril is coming. Suffering is coming. We dealt with that extensively last week.

Challenge is coming. Confusion is coming. Fog is coming.

You got to have a faith muscle to handle the challenge when it comes. He wants to build your faith muscle. That's one of the key ways he builds your faith muscle.

He actually allows for silence in your relationship with him to see how you'll respond. Don't be scared of silence. Don't be scared of God's apparent silence.

Don't take that as rejection. For us as Americans, culturally, we don't get a text back in 20 minutes from the person we texted and we assume I'm being rejected. We are a highly sensitized rejection culture.

I don't know why. Other people probably know why. I don't know why.

I'm a pastor. I just know it's true. And I just say things like that sometimes.

But it is. We're an easily offended culture. So we're highly sensitized.

Especially if there's silence, we think that is rejection. But Jesus didn't walk away. He's actually right there.

And this is an amazing moment, by the way. Look in with a Kenyanite woman and then think about your own experience sometimes in prayer or in your relationship with Jesus. You get to watch how he does this.

You get to see him actually. He's silent. He doesn't say a word.

But he's not walking away. As a matter of fact, what he's doing is he's inviting. It's not rejection.

It's invitation. He's going, is she going to come? Come on. You can do this.

You can press in again, he's saying. I'm building your faith muscle. He does this all the time.

He tells stories. They're called parables. And they're kind of complicated sometimes.

And they're not always very, very clear. As a communicator, he would often get probably feedback these days, not clear enough. Right? But he would tell these kind of unclear stories.

And then he would tell the story. We'd walk away. But I imagine him walking away like this.

Who's coming? Who's coming? And four or five would pursue him, wouldn't they? And they'd say, now, what did you really mean by that story? And he'd tell them. Don't you want to be the ones that pursue him and go, what did you mean by that story? Don't you want to be the ones that when there's a silence from God, you go, well, I know that God is near to those who draw near to him. I'm pressing into the silence.

I'm not scared of the silence. I know that what the Bible teaches is true. I know that God is absolutely present.

I know that he hasn't abandoned me. I know that God hasn't rejected me. If there's silence, he's probably training me.

That's what's happening. That Canaanite woman pressed in anyway. She pushed through the silence to get closer to Jesus.

That is super important in your prayer lives. That is super important to understand that that's often how Jesus works to build your faith muscle. If you don't see him as a coach, but only as a kind of comforter with a benign smile from very far above, that was a sweet prayer they just prayed.

Oh, nice. That's not what Jesus is like in the Bible, and he said not a word. And then he said, I came for the people of Israel.

And then he said a saying at the time, we don't feed the dogs to children's bread. I've had the privilege of having a prayer partner for over 20 years. So in that relationship, we've been able to watch the highs and the lows of prayer life, right? The moment where answers to prayer happen in ways that blow us away, and the moments where we just keep praying and praying and praying, and we don't see anything.

And we have stories, multiple stories over two decades of that being the case. I've learned a lot about prayer because I've prayed with somebody else over time, which I highly recommend. So we began to pray for my prayer partner's father.

My prayer partner's English, Jeremy Longhurst, who goes here. His father, of course, is English, and was a classic British atheist. As we started praying, for 10 years, we prayed that his father would come to Jesus, that he would get saved.

We saw nothing. His dad would visit, and I'd invite him to church. His dad would say, in a very nice British accent, you know, no, thank you very much.

We'd give him books on Christianity, he wouldn't read them. He was just completely uninterested, but we prayed, and we prayed almost weekly. We're praying, fasting, praying, fasting, praying.

Nothing seems to be happening. And when you're in the middle of that, you feel like all you're hitting is silence. But because we had each other, and we just believed that God was going to do something in his father's life, we kept pressing in.

And then his dad was diagnosed with a brain tumor. I happened to be in London on an international flight for a day, the day after he was diagnosed. I got with his dad.

I was able to share Jesus and the Lord with him. He didn't receive the Lord, but for the first time ever, as he faced this brain tumor and this diagnosis that would likely lead to his death, he opened just a little, some answer. We began to pray fervently and fast that he would be healed of the brain tumor.

He was not. He died of the brain tumor. God didn't answer that prayer, but he died a Christian.

He died a Christian, pursued prayer, not even pursuing the answer itself, pursuing the Lord himself. Don't let silence scare you off. I read a heartbreaking interview yesterday in the Wall Street Journal, and

interviewed a man named Michael Shermer.

He is the president of the Skeptic Society. And the Skeptic Society is a society of, as you can imagine, religious skeptics who are atheists or agnostics and don't believe in the reality of a living God. It's a poignant interview, very worth reading.

He's an articulate spokesman for skepticism. And definitely, as he shares, he kind of has a view of, you know, I'm willing to face into the reality of life and kind of toughness. But what's intriguing and heart-wrenching, as he shares, that my skepticism began after I'd converted to evangelical Christianity, and someone near to me and dear to me got into a serious accident, and I prayed for her healing, and it didn't happen.

And that's when I became a skeptic. It's heartbreaking, super understandable for many of us who've been through prayers like that. Actually, I often hear about people saying, I prayed for that, it didn't happen, and I walked away from my faith.

Here's even the more heartbreaking thing. Was there not someone in his life who had been discipled and had learned the Bible well enough to be able to say to Michael in that moment when he said, all I get is silence when I pray to God for the healing of this person I love, to say to him, hey, don't let silence scare you off. Let me show you different places in the Bible where people got silence under urgent situations, and it was actually God inviting them in farther.

What if he'd been discipled to understand that the moment that you're in is not a moment to actually walk away, it's a moment to walk into more of Jesus, to sustain a dialogue with Jesus, that at that moment, had he had a biblical worldview, and someone had challenged him with a biblical worldview, that might have been the very thing he needed. It could still be the very thing that Michael needs to understand that that's not the crisis point where you walk away from your point, that's the crisis point where you walk into greater communion with Jesus. He's actually coaching you and training you, but you'd have to have a biblical worldview to even begin to think that way.

Do you understand that you will stop praying, you will lose a vibrant prayer life and close communion to Jesus unless you have a biblical worldview that includes the reality that Jesus is a faith coach, and he is creating some pretty tough workouts so that your muscle grows, and you can handle silence when it comes, and you can handle answers that you wish were not the answers when they come, because you are engaged in him and faith in him. Finally, engage Jesus like a divine person, a person, a divine person. It's just fascinating to me that religious leaders will often engage Jesus this way.

They'll go up to him with a question they've been working on and forming in their club, and they do it because they want to confuse Jesus, they want to trip him up. It's something of a game. Not every religious leader does this, some are very sincere, but most of them, it's part of a game.

They form this question, they go and ask him the question, he gives them a response that absolutely blows all their circuits, they have no category for it, and they walk away sad, they walk away mad, they walk away offended. But these folks that don't know the game, they don't know the religious system, they actually engage Jesus like a person, like the Canaanite woman. She actually engages Jesus and goes, I'm not going to be easily offended, this guy is the son of David, I'm going to keep pressing in and pushing in.

I'm actually going to talk to him like I would talk to a person, so there's back and forth. The religious leaders hardly ever do back and forth, but the widows and the Canaanite moms and the prostitutes and the mixed ethnic people that were totally marginalized by that society, they don't seem to know better, and they actually seem to think that they're engaging with a person when they go to Jesus, and they engage him. Deacon Val calls it sustaining a dialogue with Jesus.

I have such a growth area here in my own prayer life, because I will meet with the Lord, I will ask things of Him, and then I just kind of passively wait, and when they don't come I'm learning, go back and ask again, and then ask again and say, well why didn't you answer this Lord? Why didn't this happen? He wants that kind of engagement from you. He wants a true, having a relationship with Jesus is not a nice phrase. It's actually one of the best descriptions of a prayer life, and your life, back and forth with Him.

Why didn't this happen? Wait, the Bible says that you love this, why aren't you seeming to love this right now? I don't understand. Look at Moses in the Old Testament, it was read this morning. He's engaging God and saying, God, you said you would send somebody with me, where are they? And how about if it's you? How about if it's you that goes with me? How about that God? Oh, I know you're upset with Israel, but you also said you loved Israel, remember? Do you ever dialogue with God like that? I hardly ever do.

I've been brought up short this week studying this passage, and these passages. We engage Jesus as a person, but we do engage Him as a divine person, here's what I mean. He will want to respond to your prayer, but He's also going to respond to many other things at the same time, because He's divine.

He wants to respond to this Canaanite woman's prayer for her daughter, but He actually has a cosmic thing He's doing in that moment where He's also saying, I actually came for everyone. Yes, I came first to the people of Israel, that has been my priority and my mission, but I've also come for everyone. So I want to heal your daughter, but I want to bring a cosmic healing among the races and the ethnicities and the marginalized and the unseen.

I'm bringing a cosmic work. While I answer your prayer, I'm answering a massive prayer. He's divine.

He cares about your need, absolutely, but He cares about the larger sort of cosmic things that He's also working, and He does both at the same time. You are engaging a person, but let's be clear, you are engaging a divine person who will respond to your cry, your Lord help me, with the fullness of His God vision. That's humbling.

That's very important. So we engage, but we engage the fullness of where He is. There's something I've been praying for for 20 years, and it hasn't happened yet.

I can't pretend that it's happened, it just clearly hasn't happened yet. I've been praying fervently for this thing now for five years especially. I'm ready to enter into a deeper dialogue with Jesus about this.

I would like to know why He hasn't answered this yet. I'm hoping for a conversation together. I want to respectfully push back.

Don't be afraid of the silence. He's training you to engage Him ever more deeply. He's bringing you closer and closer to His self as He also responds to your heart cry and prayer.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Thanks for listening. Our vision at Church of the Resurrection is to equip everyone for transformation.

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