

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

The Reach of Jesus' Touch

(Mark 7:24-30)

Study #14

Introduction: For people like you...

As usual, it was late April, 1984, when I received my irregularly delivered February/March copy of the Wittenburg (sic) Door magazine.¹ It was usual for it to be late, but it came unusually packaged.

The magazine was normally printed on glossy paper and looked professionally published. This copy came in the form of a sloppily put together, black and white photocopy.

Wondering what had happened, I read these words on the front cover, *"Attention Reader: Due to a shortage of printed issues, we have sent this photocopy of the rough layouts to you and others like you. (Further explanation, p. 2)."*

I was somewhat taken aback by this note, so I turned to page 2 to find the following.

¹ Does it seem to you that I go to the well of The Wittenburg Door magazine too often, that I have used illustrations from The Door too frequently, especially recently? My rationale for using the Door is a tentative theory that sometimes some well-placed sarcasm and satire can get across a point very effectively. Today's example is one of the better attention-grabbers from the Door's archives. (www.wittenburgdoor.com)

"Further Explanation: What can we say? We came up short this time. What's worse is that our printer seems to have misplaced the final artwork. So, in order for you to get any copy at all, we have compiled the early rough layouts and made this photocopy. We would have simply copied one of the finished, printed issues, but we needed to get all of those in the mail to our other customers. - The Door"

It started to dawn on me that I had been "dissed", treated like a second-class citizen. I was not only confused. I was becoming anger.

I turned back to the front cover to be sure that I was actually the intended recipient of this photocopy and saw on the mailing label "ACCT # 10363C5 - LOW PRIO"

I was "low priority"? What was going on?!

Then I saw that the issue's theme was "The New Racism." Two seconds later, I realized that I had been had.

The Door had dedicated this issue to attacking the ugly sin of racism. And they had cleverly oriented the whole magazine to that theme by putting me in the shoes of those who actually are sometimes considered second class citizens, people who know the sting of racism.

The Door had my full and undivided attention! I read the issue with eyes and mind wide open, newly sensitized to the problem of racism in ways I would not have been had it not been for the creative, shocking ploy the editors of the Door had used to grab my attention.

The Door's strategy was brilliant and is one you might want to consider when you are introducing a radical, paradigm-shifting concept to someone who is unfamiliar with your theme. Try using revolutionary - even jarring, shocking! - language to grab their attention!

Today we find one of the more provocative stories around in Mark's Gospel. It shows Jesus breaching the greatest barrier between people groups in history. On the way to doing so, He uses some pretty jarring language...

After a couple of weeks away from Mark, we watch as Jesus, once again, leaves the hustle and bustle of Capernaum (His home base for ministry) for a time of retreat, refreshment, and some time alone with His disciples.

This time He went a good distance away from Capernaum, even leaving the land of Israel. But if His travels took Him a long way away in terms of miles, He went even farther in terms of culture.

ANOTHER Attempt at Seclusion (v. 24)

From Galilee to Tyre (v. 24a)

[24] Jesus got up and went away from there to the region of Tyre.

Tyre was the major city in the district of Phoenicia, the land of present-day Lebanon. The political region of Phoenicia hugged the coastline of the Mediterranean just north of Galilee and metropolitan Tyre itself was located about twenty miles to the northwest of Capernaum.

This area was wholly inhabited by Gentiles, non-Jews. And it was known for hostility toward the Jewish people. The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that the Tyrians were Israel's "bitterest enemies."

The opposition of Tyre to Israel dated back hundreds of years to the time of the wicked queen, Jezebel. You can read about her deplorable reign in 1 Kings 16, which involved deceit, witchcraft, immorality and idolatry.

Not all of Tyre's rulers were as awful as Jezebel (she was the wife of the REALLY awful King Ahab), Tyre represented to most Jews of Jesus' day the most extreme form of paganism that they could expect to encounter anywhere within a few days travel of Palestine.²

² The city of Tyre had close links with Palestine, especially in the days of Herod the Great, for commercial purposes. Herod, not being Jewish or making any claim to godliness, would have had no qualms about trading with Tyre.

In Jesus' trip to Tyre He and the twelve would have found the most foreign land imaginable - foreign in terms of geography, ethnicity, morality, and worship.³

But the trip was necessary. Jesus and His followers needed to escape the pressure of the crowds of Galilee. And they probably also needed to get away from the increasing opposition of the Pharisees and scribes that was making life more and more challenging.

So off they went to the area near Tyre for some R & R. But as desperately as He might have longed for privacy, it was not to be. Even here, even in pagan Tyre, Jesus was discovered.⁴

From Seclusion to Spotlight (v. 24b)

[24b]...And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it yet He could not escape notice.

The fame of His teaching ministry preceded Him.

People had already heard of His power over sickness and disease and even death and they were flocking to Him. They had heard that He had power over demons. Taken together, all of this made it impossible for Him to stay "under the radar."

Mark doesn't mention crowds of people coming to Jesus, but that is what I would assume was happening.

And out of all those who were crowding around Him, Mark zeroes in on one person, in particular, who had discovered His whereabouts.

³ Except for a brief moment on the shore of the Decapolis (Mark 5) to deal with the Gerasene demoniac, this is the only time Jesus was out of Jewish territory. And this section that begins today and continues into Mark 8 (specifically, 7:24--8:10) is the only time He spent an extended time outside of Palestine.

⁴ Both times Jesus had intended to withdraw to rest His efforts had been thwarted (6:30-34; 6:53-56).

A Desperate Mother's Plight (vv. 25-26a)

A Daughter with a PROBLEM (v. 25)

[25] But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately came and fell at His feet.

The world over, mothers are famous for their concern for their children. They fight for the welfare of their kids and when something goes wrong, they fly into action.

This that we read about here has got to be a mother's worst nightmare - a demon has invaded the life and the soul of her "little daughter."

Can you even imagine such a thing? We aren't told how the demon made itself manifest in this little girl's life. Were there convulsions, fits of rage, self-destructive urges, profanity, and violence against others?

We aren't told, but something must have convinced the mother that there was more going on than the terrible 2's or 3's, the fearsome 4's or 5's or the scary 6's and 7's!

Notice that Mark describes the demon as an "unclean spirit." There is gross uncleanness in the tender, precious soul of this "little girl."

There is no way we can be sure how old she was by this description ("**little girl**" - under the age of ten would be my guess). But Jairus, the synagogue official, had used the exact same words when he had begged Jesus to heal his [5:23] "**little daughter**" who was lying in bed, sick, at the point of death.

This mother had heard about Jesus. She knew His reputation with exorcisms and His miracle-working power and so she got to Him as quickly as she could.

Like Jairus had done before her, this woman threw herself at Jesus' feet. Her every action here shouts desperation - and profound regard for Jesus.

And what do we know about this woman?

Well, the contrast between the desperate Jairus and this desperate mother ends with their desperation over their daughter's crises. In fact, the contrast between Jairus and this mother could hardly be more extreme.

What We Know of this Mother (v. 26a)

[26] Now the woman was a Gentile, of the Syrophoenician race.

For a variety of reasons, this woman was one with whom no self-respecting Jewish rabbi of Jesus' day would have had anything to do.

First off, she was a woman. In Judaism, there has never been a disrespect of women. In fact, women were accorded great respect in Old Testament Scripture and in Jewish life, generally.

But, there were strict protocols concerning the interaction between a man and a woman in proper Jewish society. No rabbi would have spoken publicly with a woman to whom he was not related.

Second, she was a Gentile. As a non-Jew, this woman would not have been given the time of day by the rabbis of the first century.

Third, she was a member of the Syrophoenician race. She was pagan through and through.

Fourth, her daughter was demonized with an unclean spirit - who would want to have anything to do with her?! A typical rabbi of Jesus' day would have assumed sinfulness on the part of the mother, the father, or the little girl!

Now, did this desperate mother know about all of these barriers erected between her and Rabbi Jesus? From the conversation that ensues, I suspect that she did.

Still, she did not hesitate to bring her request to Jesus - over and over and over again!

A Spirited Conversation (vv. 26b-29)

The Mother's Plea (v. 26b)

[26b]...And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

This was not “one and done” asking. Mom repeatedly begged Jesus to help her daughter. There is a good, but old word to describe her. She is importunate. Relentless.

And, after repeated “asks”, she finally got a rise out of Jesus. Listen as He responds to her pleas.

Jesus' Reply (v. 27)

[27] And He was saying to her, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Jesus' apparently harsh words

Hmmm... Jesus' response is probably not what we would have expected. It is not diplomatic. In fact, it appears to be just plain harsh and insensitive. He is negative to the point of offensiveness.

He refers to the woman and her daughter as “dogs.” And if you didn't know, dogs - our “best friends” - are not presented in the most positive light in Scripture.

Dogs are associated with general uncleanness. Those of you who are students of dogs will agree that dogs have an undeveloped sense of personal hygiene.⁵ In the Bible, the term “dog” refers to somebody who is worthless.⁶

In the New Testament, Jesus warns us to not give what is holy to dogs⁷ and Paul described his enemies as dogs.⁸

Given all this, when Jews of the first century referred to Gentiles as “dogs” they were clearly not handing out a compliment on how cute they were.

So, this is the kind of comment a Gentile like this mother might have expected to hear from a Jew. But for us to hear it from Jesus is a bit shocking.

It leaves us uncomfortable because it seems to show Jesus buying in to first century racism, engaging in ugly name-calling, and reluctant to help a needy mom.⁹

However... - before we jump to the conclusion that Jesus - whom we know to be the most loving and compassionate Man to have ever lived - was tasteless, rude, and offensive to this desperate woman with a demon-possessed little girl, let's think a bit about this exchange.

Recognize the context of His words

I mentioned earlier the cultural barriers between Rabbi Jesus and this mother. Of all the barriers we might list none was taller, none was more formidable, none was more fundamental than the barrier of her non-Jewishness.

This rift between Jew and Gentile was the most basic division of humanity that has ever existed, more basic than male/female or slave/free or rich/poor or black/white/brown.

It is the division between those who ARE the people of God and those who ARE NOT the people of God.

And we are eaves-dropping in on a conversation that will be a game-changer in the work of the Kingdom of God.

Again, Jesus refers to the woman and her daughter as “dogs.”

⁵ Exodus 22:31; 1 Kings 21:23; 22:38; 2 Kings 9:36

⁶ 1 Samuel 24:15; 2 Samuel 16:9; Isaiah 56:10

⁷ Matthew 7:6

⁸ Philippians 3:2

⁹ Matthew's account of this exchange is more extreme, using nearly racist language.

Does it seem to you that by this Jesus is calling them and their kind *unclean*?

Look at the passage in Mark that immediately precedes this one and you will see Jesus declaring all foods clean (7:14-23). It is hard to believe that having declared pigs clean He is now saying that Gentiles are unclean!

So, Jesus' comment was shocking, jarring.

But, this is a ground-breaking conversation for the advance of the Kingdom of God. This is an exceptional discussion that will lead to a breakthrough expansion of Jesus' ministry.

So, should we really be surprised that His words are shocking, seemingly out of character, and jarring?

He is about to land the whole work of God in a place it has never been before, so, Wittenburg Door-like, He says what He says the way He says it to grab attention.

And, His response to the mother's plea is more than a simple dismissal of her daughter's need. His words about dogs and children and table scraps take the form of a mini-parable.

Jesus' response - a parable

The parable is about children and table scraps and dogs. And, of course, there are "dogs" and then there are "dogs."

The "dogs" in view here are not street mongrels, but house pets.¹⁰ Jesus is referring to a custom common the world over, then and now, the practice of feeding house pets with table scraps.

In His parable-response to the woman, she and her daughter and their kind (Gentiles) are the "dogs" who are lower on the food chain than are the "children" (the chosen people of God, the Jews).

And with that in mind, let's take another thoughtful look at Jesus' words. By what He has to say to the woman, I think we can glean two main ideas.

First, Jesus is affirming that the Jews are in a more privileged position than are the Gentiles.

A NEW LOOK at Jesus' words

He affirms Jewish priority

Now I am a Gentile, a non-Jew. I have placed my faith in Jesus for salvation and am confident that I am a child of God - no thanks to anything I have done; all praise to Him for what He has done!

But when I read my Old Testament I see very clearly that God chose the Jews to be His chosen people, NOT Gentiles.

Here, Jesus is affirming the priority of the Jew. And I believe that any fair-minded reader of the Old Testament will see the same.¹¹

But Jesus' words were intended to do something else besides make a case for God's choice of the Jews.

He invites the woman's pursuit

Notice that in His response to the woman He did not say, "No!"

Rather, He very intentionally kept the door open for conversation. He did so by answering her with a one verse parable. He is challenging this desperate mother to stay after Him, justify her request, not quit and walk away, pursue!

So, did the woman understand this to be what Jesus was doing? Judging from her immediate, witty, clever response, I would say, "Yes!"

¹⁰ We know this because of the form used for the word "dog."

¹¹ See Romans 1:16 and elsewhere in the Bible that shows God making a very clear and decisive choice of the Jews over the Gentiles.

She didn't walk away. She didn't give up. She didn't even seem to take offense at the link between her and "dogs."

No, she got right up in Jesus' face and - respectfully - answered Him from within the parable.¹²

The Woman's Rejoinder (v. 28)

[28] But she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord,¹³ but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs."

Sure, the woman's reply shows her understanding and acceptance of Israel's priority with God. But her point to Jesus is that while the *children* have priority, the *Gentiles/dogs/outsideers* also have a legitimate claim on the available food, too.¹⁴

This Gentile woman, this outsider (!), insists that the ministry of Jesus, whom she recognized as the great Jewish Messiah, **MUST** extend beyond the Jews! His reach has to extend to touch all people - including her daughter.

So, she cleverly turned Jesus' parable to her own advantage. The crumbs dropped by the children were *intended* for the dogs. And she was more than willing to accept crumbs from Jesus if those crumbs would help her little girl.

Well, you've got to admit that the woman's got pluck and guts and tenacity. Her answer shows her confidence in Jesus' ability and resources and in His goodness.

And, just as His parable invited her response, her comment invites a climactic response from Him. Clearly He was delighted with what she had to say.

¹² Fascinating, isn't it? This woman is the only person in the Gospels who "got" one of Jesus' parables without having it explained. She's very bright and spiritually sensitive.

¹³ By calling Him "Lord," she affirms His authority.

¹⁴ Technically, when dogs eat crumbs from the floor, they do not rob the children. The dogs and the children eat at the same time.

Jesus' Commendation (v. 29)

[29] And He said to her, "Because of this answer go; the demon has gone out of your daughter."

Sweet. Short. Simple.

Without any magical incantation, the Lord assured this mother that her daughter is no longer possessed by an unclean spirit.

And He also assures her and us that it was her faithful, persistent pursuit of Jesus that won the day. She is a female Jacob who has sparred with Jesus and prevailed.

When she returned home, she found her daughter whole, delivered, just as Jesus said.

A Daughter Delivered (v. 30)

[30] And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having left.¹⁵

This is a wonderful miracle! A little girl, tormented by an unclean spirit, is released from that oppression. And we rejoice with the mother over her daughter's freedom.

But we see, on reflection, that the main point of the story is not the exorcism but the conversation between Jesus and the mom.

What has taken place between Jesus and this Syrophenician mother represents a watershed moment in the expansion of God's kingdom work and reveals something of the heart of God for all people.

¹⁵ In later tradition, the story is embellished. The mother is given the name "Justa" and the daughter is "Berenice." Mark, though, as usual, presents the barest details of the story.

Conclusion:

In the exchange between the woman and Jesus what was at stake was the expansion of God's Kingdom work into territory never imagined: the world of the Gentiles!

This passage chronicles a pivotal moment in redemptive history, a moment when the door of the Gospel was opened to all of humanity. The wonder of the make-up of the church - an entity comprised of Jews AND Gentiles - begins here.

Today, all of us who are here - Gentiles, for the most part - share the children's bread in the church. And every person alive is equally invited to enjoy the banquet Jesus has prepared.

So we respond to this story with thanksgiving and with action:

Each of us today is invited to "taste and see that the Lord is good." We are welcomed to enjoy the salvation offered in Jesus. For this we are truly grateful!

And, understanding that no one is outside the reach of Jesus' love, we look at everyone through a different lens now.

The abrasive neighbor, the obnoxious classmate, the overbearing boss, the difficult spouse, the one with a different worldview - all of these are people of worth.

All of them are people for whom Christ died. All of them are people you and I are called to LOVE, SERVE, and EVANGELIZE, to the glory of God.