

Scraps to the Dogs

Mark 7:24-37

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Many people have pets in their homes. Those pets tend to be viewed as beloved members of the family. Sometimes, you might even wonder if some members of your family love your pet more than you! But as much as we love our pets, we know that while they are members of the family, they are second-class members. If we have to choose between feeding the kids or feeding the dog, we'd choose the kids and try to find a better home for the dog. Similarly, people set limits for their pets that they don't set for other family members—some aren't allowed in bed, others aren't allowed on the furniture, and still others aren't allowed in the house! But even in homes where all those things are true, pets don't eat at the dinner table with you. Sometimes they are put outside or in their kennels while the family eats, while other times they are left to sit beneath the table hoping someone drops some of the food for them to eat. So while they are members of our family, they're still second-class members.

In our passage this morning, we are going to see Jesus draw upon that dynamic in His encounter with a woman as they talk about Jesus' relation to her and others like her. We're going to look at two encounters with Jesus this morning, and each one raises some questions, but as we unpack them, we'll find they are full of rich truth.

The Syrophenician Woman

Mark sets the stage for our first encounter in the opening verses of our text today.

²⁴ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know which house he was staying in, but he couldn't keep it a secret.

²⁵ Right away a woman who had heard about him came and fell at his feet. Her little girl was possessed by an evil spirit, ²⁶ and she begged him to cast out the demon from her daughter. (Mark 7:24-26a, NLT)

There is actually a fair bit of information in these opening verses that we don't want to miss. First, we see Jesus leaving Galilee and heading up to the region of Tyre. Unless your biblical geography is better than mine, that bit of detail doesn't mean much. But it's actually pretty significant, because Tyre was not part of Israel. In other words, Jesus left Galilee (which was in Israel) and headed into Gentile territory! That helps to set the scene for this story.

Mark's juxtaposition of this story with the previous one is telling as well. Jesus had just gotten done doing battle with the Pharisees and had told the gathered crowd and His disciples that what is on the outside is not what defiles us. He had taught them that the Jewish ceremonial laws were no longer necessary for people to follow. In so doing, Jesus said that all that was needed to be acceptable to God was to trust in Jesus. This meant Jesus had opened the door for Gentiles to ultimately come to faith. How interesting it is that in the very next story Mark records, Jesus is heading for Gentile territory! I don't think this was an accident.

Jesus was heading to Tyre, but it doesn't seem as though He was doing so primarily to continue His public ministry. It seems like Jesus was heading there to get away from the crowds, possibly to have some time alone with His disciples. We are told that He didn't want anyone to know where He was, but they couldn't keep it a secret.

And then Mark introduces us to a mother whose daughter had been possessed by an evil spirit. She had heard about Jesus before, and we are told that right away she showed up and fell before Jesus, asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Apart from the fact that this story is happening in Gentile territory, we have seen similar scenarios play out several times before in Jesus' ministry. But this one takes a different turn. Listen to what Mark says happened next.

Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia,²⁷ Jesus told her, "First I should feed the children—my own family, the Jews. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."²⁸ She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children's plates."²⁹ "Good answer!" he said. "Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter."³⁰ And when she arrived home, she found her little girl lying quietly in bed, and the demon was gone. (Mark 7:26b-30, NLT)

We expect Jesus to take compassion on this woman and heal her daughter, but that's not what happens at all! Instead of offering healing, Jesus seems to put her down and push her away. He tells her that first he should feed his own family, the Jews, and that it wouldn't be right to take food from the children and give it to the dogs. This is a very unexpected response!

It was not uncommon in those days for the Jews to refer to Gentiles as dogs. This wasn't a compliment; it was a slur. Generally speaking, dogs were not seen as beloved creatures and pets in those days. Often, dogs were feral and seen primarily as pests. When the Jews referred to the Gentiles in this way, that was what they meant. But it seems wildly out of character for Jesus to refer to Gentiles in this way, especially to speak this way to a woman coming to Him for help. So, is Jesus just being mean here, or are we missing something?

This is one of those times where something is lost both in the translation to English and in a written record as opposed to being able to be there. Much of our understanding of what a person is saying comes from body language, and unfortunately we don't get to see what Jesus' body language was saying as He spoke to the woman. What we do know is that the word Jesus used when he described the Gentiles as dogs was not the word the Jews usually used, meaning feral dogs that were pests—it was the word that was used to refer to dogs kept as pets. As such, I imagine there was a twinkle in Jesus' eye as He spoke to this woman that let her know that He was not really insulting her but pushing her to a deeper understanding and appreciation.

Additionally, notice that Jesus did not turn her away completely—He simply said that He must go *first* to His own family, the Jews; He left open the possibility that He might also

minister to the Gentiles. While this sounds harsh at first blush (and I still imagine it took the woman a bit off-guard), I don't think Jesus was being harsh at all. He was trying to challenge her faith and deepen her understanding.

To the woman's credit, she rose to Jesus' challenge. I think Jesus expected as much. She replied saying, in essence, that I may simply be a dog in the household of the Jews, but even the dogs at least get some of the scraps from the children! She doesn't question Jesus' description of her as a dog. She doesn't demand that Jesus heal her daughter, instead, she appeals to Jesus' grace. She recognizes that she doesn't deserve healing because she isn't a Jew, but she holds out hope that at least the Lord might send some crumbs in her direction.

Jesus responds with surprise and delight at her answer. He then tells her that her daughter had been healed and she should return home. And when she did, she discovered that her daughter had indeed been made whole once more.

So what does this encounter teach us? I think it teaches a couple things.

First, none of us has the right to demand anything of God. This woman did not approach Jesus with a sense of entitlement (as we sometimes do). Instead, she approached Him in humility. She recognized that Jesus didn't owe her anything, and in fact, would have every right to simply turn her away, but she came to Him humbly, asking for His help. This is a pretty good model for us to follow in our lives.

Second, we should be persistent in our petitions. Throughout scripture God tells us to be persistent in prayer. I think this story is a good depiction of why that is. God doesn't tell us to be persistent in praying because He wants us to wear Him down until He gives us what we want, but because He knows that through our persistent praying, He has the opportunity to teach us important lessons. I imagine this woman learned far more from this encounter than if Jesus had just done what she asked the first time.

Third, God welcomes any who come to Him in faith. The Pharisees in the previous section would have dismissed this woman without a second thought. They likely would have concluded that her daughter's demon possession was an affliction from God because of her pagan culture. Jesus, however, does not write this woman off. He gently pushes her and challenges her faith. Because she came to Jesus in faith, she was welcomed by Him. The same is true for us. Many people feel they have messed up too badly for the Lord to welcome them. They worry that the Lord would turn them away if they came. But this passage reminds us that Jesus welcomes any who come to Him in faith.

Fourth, we shouldn't write people off because of their label. The other side of this story is that we should treat others the way Jesus did. It would have been easy for Him to simply write her off as a lost cause because she was a Gentile. But He didn't. Similarly, it is easy for us to write people off because of some label (atheist, agnostic, Mormon, gay, transgendered, woke, entitled, young, old, etc.) But we would be better

served to feel people out. Give them a chance, and you may be surprised what the Lord is doing in them. It's easier to write people off, but thank God, that's not what Jesus does to us. We should follow His example.

The Deaf Man

The second account in our passage this morning is another encounter with a Gentile, this time with a man who was deaf and could not speak. Here's how Mark records the encounter.

³¹ Jesus left Tyre and went up to Sidon before going back to the Sea of Galilee and the region of the Ten Towns. ³² A deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to him, and the people begged Jesus to lay his hands on the man to heal him. ³³ Jesus led him away from the crowd so they could be alone. He put his fingers into the man's ears. Then, spitting on his own fingers, he touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ Looking up to heaven, he sighed and said, "*Ephphatha*," which means, "Be opened!" ³⁵ Instantly the man could hear perfectly, and his tongue was freed so he could speak plainly! ³⁶ Jesus told the crowd not to tell anyone, but the more he told them not to, the more they spread the news. ³⁷ They were completely amazed and said again and again, "Everything he does is wonderful. He even makes the deaf to hear and gives speech to those who cannot speak." (Mark 7:31-37, NLT)

Mark introduces the story by telling us that Jesus left Tyre and then went to Sidon (another Gentile city) before going back closer to home. He doesn't give us a timeline here, but many scholars believe Jesus may have spent up to 8 months in Gentile territory with His disciples! In other words, it's possible that the better part of a year passed between the healing of the woman's daughter and this account! We don't know this for sure, of course, but most people think Jesus used this time in Gentile territory to really instruct and train His disciples. It makes sense to me.

Regardless of the timeline, we are told that a deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to Him, and the people begged Jesus to heal him. Jesus' response is a picture of tenderness. He wasn't concerned about the applause of the crowds; He was concerned about the well-being of the man before Him. He took pity on him and took him aside in private before healing him.

As we read about how Jesus healed the man, we find some of Jesus' actions a little strange. Jesus put His fingers in the man's ears (which seems reasonable), then spit on his fingers and touched the man's tongue (which seems gross), looked up to heaven, sighed, and then said the words "be opened" in His language. Why does Jesus do these things, and why does Mark see fit to record them?

The answer, I think, comes when we remember that this man was deaf. Jesus had no good way of communicating to the man what was going on. This is why I think Mark records Jesus' actions in detail. The actions weren't needed for Jesus to heal the man, but they were needed to help the man understand what Jesus was doing. With that understanding in mind, think through Jesus' actions a second time.

He puts His fingers in the man's ears, which tells the man Jesus is aware of his affliction. He spits on his fingers and touches the man's tongue. This again, shows that Jesus knows the man can't speak. In addition, people in this day believed there were healing properties in spit, and so Jesus spitting on his fingers before touching the man's tongue may have communicated that He was going to heal him. Jesus looked up to heaven, letting the man know where this healing was coming from. He sighed, likely a sign of understanding the man's struggle and exhaustion. It was a way of Jesus communicating His care for the man. And then He spoke and the man was healed. Personally, I wonder, did the man hear Jesus' words? Were those words the first thing he heard? Obviously we don't know, but we do know that suddenly he could hear and speak!

The crowd, when they saw what had happened began to rejoice at what Jesus had done. He told them not to tell anyone, but they couldn't help themselves. The people began to tell anyone who would listen about what Jesus had done! The people declared that everything Jesus did was wonderful and exclaimed that He even made the deaf hear and gave speech to those who could not speak. Knowing this was a Gentile crowd, you would assume that they were not familiar with the Jewish prophecies about the Messiah (though some might have been), but the disciples would have been. I'm sure that as they heard these words and witnessed this miracle, they immediately remembered the words of Isaiah 35,

⁵ And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. ⁶ The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! (Isaiah 35:5-6, NLT)

Jesus was checking many of the boxes of the Messiah—and He would go on to check all of the boxes. But little by little the disciples were coming to understand more of who Jesus was. I suspect that like the crowds gathered that day, they were puzzled by Jesus' instructions to keep quiet. If Jesus was the Messiah, shouldn't they tell everyone? But Jesus knew there was a timing to things that was important. To the disciples' credit, though they likely didn't understand that timing, they did trust Jesus.

Conclusion

So as we look at these two accounts, we ask what relevance do they have for us today? What can we learn from Jesus performing these two miracles in Gentile territory all those years ago? I've got a few lessons for us to draw.

First, all people matter to God. In both of these accounts, we see Jesus taking the time to meet the needs of people that others had surely overlooked. They are people the Jewish religious elite would have overlooked as well. One of the things that is often frightening to me as I read about Jesus' rebukes of the Pharisees is that I see so much similarity between myself and them. The modern church has become the religious elite of our day, and it is possible for us to make the same mistakes they did.

The people Jesus healed in these stories were Gentiles and were people with serious problems. Most people would look at them and conclude that if they were to try to help, it would require far too much effort and time. Now, those people didn't have the ability to solve the root issue like Jesus did, but that's not the point. The point is that we are supposed to see people and realize they matter to God. We should be willing to be inconvenienced, to look weird in the eyes of others, to invest time into people that others say are lost causes. We need to remember that every person is created in God's image, and they matter to Him! If they matter to Him, then they should matter to us. And if you feel like you're one of those people who others write off, remember that you matter to God—He cares about you and sees you and loves you.

Second, we see the importance of seeking God's help. The reason these two people experienced healing was because they sought Jesus out and asked Him for it. Most Christians struggle with prayer. I think there are lots of reasons for this, but the effect of our struggles is that we miss out on the blessings God has for us! These people would not have been healed if they hadn't asked Jesus to do so. We need to spend time asking for God's help. Listen to what one commentator said about this,

Each of us needs to seriously consider the following applications of this matter:

- No matter how busy, we should regularly be exposing our souls to God in adoring worship, that he might be glorified and his life burned into ours. If we are not doing this, we are sinning.
- We should be praying for our inner life: that our character will have grace to match our profession; that we will walk our talk.
- We should be praying *in detail* for every member of our family.
- We should regularly pray for our neighbors.
- We should have a list of missionaries and systematically pray for them.
- We should be praying daily for our churches—going beyond generalization—naming names, programs, and needs.¹

These stories this morning show what happens when you stop striving in your own power and turn to the Lord—you find rest. In a world that tells us to keep working, keep pushing, and never sit still, this is a message we need to hear. Our first resort should be to ask God's help—not our last.

These verses are a picture of God's love for us. They show that Jesus sees and feels the pain of His people, and that He has the power to step in and make things better. Sometimes He allows pain to persist for a time to help us learn something. But often the lesson we are supposed to learn is that we need Him. The longer we spend trying to fix things in our own power, the longer we will spend wearing ourselves out. Remember God's love and care for you—but also remember His power. Jesus drove out demons with a word and healed a man's illness simply by touching Him. He has the power to help us in our lives—we just need to seek Him.

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¹ Hughes, R. Kent. *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*. Vol. 1. Preaching the Word. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989.