

**Prayer for Illumination**

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that, as your Scriptures are read and your Word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

**Mark 7: 24-30 (NRSV)**

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

**Message: Going to the dogs****Are you a dog person?**

Those of us who have dogs like them for a variety of reasons. Dogs are loyal, love us unconditionally and are always ready to play or be with us, no matter whether we are having a good day or a bad day. That’s a large part of the reason why dogs have been called our “best friends.” I had a dog growing up – Penny, a long-haired dachshund. We were best friends for much of her life.

That attitude is prevalent mostly in the Western world, where dogs have been domesticated for centuries. Dogs aren’t looked on so highly in other parts of the world. They’re work animals, here to work for us. They help shepherd cattle and serve as guard or service animals. As a matter of fact, in some countries, dog is on the menu. Dogs are more of a public nuisance or even a hazard in other countries. How many of us remember the movie “A Cry in the Dark” about the Australian infant taken and killed by dingoes - wild dogs, in 1980?

Our Scripture passage for today, Mark 7:24-30, contains a reference to dogs. Rather than an actual dog, the word is used in reference to a person, a derogatory term. The word is used twice: first, Jesus refers to the Gentile woman who comes to him as a dog. Second, the woman refers to herself as a dog, but does so in a remarkable way.

**In this Scripture, we are faced with a very real, human Jesus who is also clearly divine.** The reality of Jesus’ words clashes with our human understanding of divine love, though. Jesus isn’t very approachable, loving or kind in this passage, is he? And Mark’s version is simpler and kinder than the version we read in Matthew 15:21-28.

When Jesus was asked, “*Which commandment is the first of all?*” Jesus answered, “*The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these*” (Mark 12:28b-31).

**Calling someone a dog** - meaning they are a public nuisance or someone fit only to serve without question, **isn’t a loving thing to do.**

**What’s up?** Is it a matter of Jesus having a bad day, someone overhearing, telling the story to a scribe and writing it down for later generations to shake their heads over? You know, “that Jesus, great guy, but don’t get on his downside.” No, that’s not the case. We really have to study the lesson and meditate on it to grasp it. My understanding has changed as I have studied it over the years and yours will as well.

**Why is it a challenging lesson?** First, we have to look at Mark’s narrative context. Mark’s gospel challenges us to look at mystery of who Jesus is. Jesus is in the beginning of his public ministry. His life is complex and challenging, just like ours are today. Mark 6 relates recent events in Jesus’ life. After Jesus’ teaching is rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, Herod kills John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin. He crosses over the Sea of Galilee with his disciples to get away from work and grieve, but he is confronted by a large crowd. He teaches and heals them and then ends up feeding 5,000 people. Later that night after prayer, Jesus walks across water to meet the disciples and is immediately met by a large crowd of people who are looking for signs, but who don’t seem to have much faith to go along with their emotional high. To top things off, the Pharisees and scribes get on his case about the disciples – they didn’t do the ritual washing of their hands before they eat. Jesus lectures them on their hypocrisy: they would rather follow human traditions than seek a true relationship with God based on faith.

**After that tête-à-tête**, Jesus leaves Capernaum again, this time heading in the opposite direction, toward the Mediterranean coast, the region of Tyre. Today, that’s part of Lebanon. Jesus stays at a house, hoping not to be noticed. If that happened today, you might picture Jesus in dark sunglasses with a cap on, flip flops and maybe swim trunks. He’s a celebrity, when what he wants to be is a messenger of hope and love.

**But word gets out.** And a woman who is desperately seeking help for her young daughter comes and finds him. She comes to the house and bows at his feet. Someone bowing at the feet of a stranger would pretty much be the signal to the whole community somebody special was in town. That would be the end of vacation for Jesus. If that wasn’t bad enough, the woman is a Gentile, someone who speaks Greek. Jesus is Jewish and here comes a woman who knows nothing about Jewish law

or prophesy, bringing attention to him. Jesus is twenty miles away from Capernaum, his home, in Gentile lands, but people still seek him out.

**What does the woman do?** She begs Jesus to help her daughter, to cast a demon out of her. We don't know what has gone before. We don't know if the demon is a real spiritual presence or a mental illness. All we know is she's desperate enough to approach a strange man to beg for help – a risky thing. She's willing to do anything, knowing she could be in trouble for violating social customs and even Jewish purity laws by making the teacher unclean if she touched him. Her love for her daughter is a powerful motivation.

**What does Jesus do?** He says, “*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*” (v27). In effect, Jesus tells the woman he has come to help the Jewish people - God's chosen children, not Gentiles. And he says it in a hard way. You know how that conversation goes. Someone approaches you in the parking lot, looking for money. You look in your wallet and see you have ten bucks. You could give it to the needy person standing in front of you, but you know the kids will be hungry and it's enough money to buy lunch and take it home. You make an abrupt comment, ratcheting the tension up.

**What do you decide to do?** Do you give the person the money or do you keep it and buy the kids something? The Bible study answer: look at what Jesus says. Jesus says “*love your neighbor*” (12:31), so we should help the needy person in some way. V27 seems to say something else. Or does it? What do you think? Is this a tough lesson?

**Is Jesus following the tradition of the first century, when men dominated society and religious traditions were all-important?** Is he prejudiced toward the woman? Isn't prejudice and discrimination a form of injustice and sinful? Yet we know Jesus was divine and, therefore, without sin. How do we resolve this challenging scenario?

**To get a better picture, we need to consider what happens next.** The woman doesn't fight with Jesus about the slur. As a matter of fact, she uses it in her remarkable reply, “*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs*” (v28). The Greek word for dogs means “little dogs” or “puppies” while the Greek word for children means “children

under instruction.” In effect, she says to Jesus, “... even puppies under the table eat the crumbs dropped by the children you are teaching.” She isn’t trying to take anything away from the people of Israel, she just wants a little help from Jesus. She has a grateful, humble attitude and her thoughts, words and actions are showing it, even in the face of rejection.

**Matthew’s version of this encounter is different than Mark’s.** The rejection is not only by Jesus, but by the disciples, and she is rejected three different times. Matthew’s version mentions her faith. Jesus heals her daughter because of the woman’s faith. Mark’s version doesn’t explicitly mention faith, though the Greek implies her response to Jesus is divinely revealed. I believe the woman was drawn to Jesus by the Holy Spirit through prevenient grace, to reveal a new way.

**What’s the new way?** We have to keep in mind what preceded Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman. Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of the Pharisees’ and scribes’ reliance on human traditions instead of true faith. They have the form and practice of religion down, but have no real faith. And their attitude is one of entitlement: they deserve to be saved because of their falsely pious attitudes, actions and their lineage. They are all form and no substance.

**Contrasting this is a foreign woman with the right attitude and response** - even when verbally rejected, and no, she doesn’t understand Jewish practices. She’s a mutt compared to the thoroughbred Pharisees. Her faith isn’t based on knowledge of temple traditions, but on her willingness to go to any depth out of love for her daughter. Someone who would be viewed as a servant in the Jewish community received a gift – the healing of her daughter, by God’s grace through faith.

**The new way is a way of faith that radically changes us, our thoughts, what we say and what we do.** No matter what difficulty we may face, how often we are rejected or what people may call us, we do what we are called to do by faith out of love for God and love for others. That’s a message of substance. It’s the message of healing and salvation Jesus was working so hard and urgently to spread, first among the people of Israel, but now to the Gentiles as he showed by restoring the woman’s daughter to her.

Some scholars see Jesus with a grin on his face during his encounter with the woman. I used to as well. But that view is condescending and it does not deal with the reality of Jesus’ life. This isn’t a “wink, wink, nudge, nudge” passage. It’s a hard lesson to understand. As I have reflected on it this week, I believe the harder view to be more realistic.

**How does this realization help us with our earlier questions and our parking lot dilemma?** Let’s address the prejudice question first: did Jesus sin? Jesus did not sin, but he was making a statement. Jesus didn’t come to heal everyone, to be the Great Problem Solver. Jesus came with a specific, controversial and radical mission to complete. Jesus was born to save God’s people, the people of Israel, first and foremost. Jesus came to first fulfill the obligations of the Law, which would lead him to the cross. Only by offering himself as an atoning sacrifice could Jesus establish a new covenant, a new way, a way based on faith, hope and love. Jesus’ work was incomplete in Tyre. It occupied all of his time and attention. The rejection of Jesus’ message by the people of Israel means the message could, and did, come to the Gentiles. That’s what Jesus’ encounter with the woman showed. It was a first, difficult step.

**We, as Gentiles, are not part of God’s chosen people.** We are not entitled to special treatment by Christ. That’s hard to hear. We like to think we’re entitled to salvation. After all, we live in the “land of the free, the home of the brave,” the new Israel. That’s a false view. We are blessed to live in America and it is a great country, but we do so at the expense of the rest of the world.

As one author writes, “an entitled person thinks they have *the right* to get whatever they want - because they’re entitled to it. It’s not just that they *want* things, all people do; it’s the belief they are *owed* certain things.”<sup>1</sup> This attitude is often seen in our use of money. Our niece Dia recently told Esperanza and me a story about money and the perception of children. When she told her five year old son he couldn’t get a toy because they couldn’t afford it, he said, “Mommy, it’s easy. Just go online and get it.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.guideposts.org/comfort-hope/financial-empowerment/the-top-3-money-fears-of-parents>

**While it’s a funny story, it’s also a sobering realization.** “Entitlement is crippling our nation”<sup>2</sup> is a recent headline. While often used as an object lesson between parents and teenagers, I think it reaches much further. We are called to walk a humble path as followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls us to have faith, rather than holding onto human traditions and symbols. There seems to be a strange dichotomy at work. The more we focus our attention on traditions and symbols, the more likely we are to be like the scribes and Pharisees, worshipping the form, without the real substance of faith. Conversely, if we have faith, we find traditions and symbols emerging similar to those of the saints who have gone before us.

**When our faith is simple and pure, expressed through our attitude, words and actions, others will take notice.** They will ask questions and want to have you in their life. That’s the most powerful witness to Jesus’ love you can offer. And that’s what began when Jesus encountered the gentile woman. Those who were considered lesser received Jesus by faith. And, in time, the puppies grew up to stand side-by-side with the people of Israel as true children of God.

Our actions speak louder than words, revealing what is in our heart and mind. **A grateful heart and mind is a generous heart and mind.** Next time you encounter someone in the parking lot, don’t think of them as lesser or treat them like a dog. Instead, pray, be wise and do what the Spirit leads you to do by faith.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.guideposts.org/blogs/todays-girls-todays-parents/how-to-curb-the-entitlement-attitude-in-3-steps>