

Gospel: Mark 7:24-37 Sermon Notes

Pastor Jonathan Davis, *Syrophoenician Woman*, Notes from Sermon on Mark 7:24-37, September 8, 2024

Is this a story about gender and ethnicity – a man alone in a house speaking with a woman who isn't his wife, a Jewish person speaking with a non-Jewish Gentile foreigner? And how Jesus breaks down those stereotypes? We're not entirely clear of what the rules were back then and which if any were broken in this story.

Is it a story about faith and testing that faith to see how strong it is? Does Jesus refuse the woman's request for healing as a way of challenging and assessing her faith – to see if she can remain faithful to him even in the face of a denied request to heal her daughter?

Or is she the one testing him – to see if the gospel he preaches is really for all people, like her an outsider. Is this a story about insiders and outsider? Is this about God's chosen people Israel and whether the kingdom and love of God extends beyond those border walls? And Jesus is the outsider here. This is Jesus invading her land – he's the foreigner who doesn't belong there.

Is it a story about healing? But whose healing? Jesus' miraculous ability to heal a woman's daughter from a distance – if she asks for it in just the right way? Perhaps, but what about the change of mind Jesus made? Wasn't Jesus healed too in some way by the Syrophoenician woman? Healed of some ingrained ignorance and racism?

The Syrophoenicians have not always been the best neighbors to the Jewish people, and the people of Tyre had recently oppressed them as well.¹ You see, the nearby Jewish region produced and exported food for coastal towns like Tyre and areas like Syro-Phoenicia. These rich and powerful cities depended on poor Jewish farm land regions to make food for them, and in times of crisis or famine, it was the wealthy cities (like Tyre) that took all the food. So there are years and generations of resentment built up between the Jew and the Syrophoenician, and so no wonder why Jesus might say something like, "It's not fair to take the children's food and to give it to the dogs." The wealthy were the dogs who took all the resources and the Jewish people were tired of it.²

I mean, that would be like a wounded Israeli soldier today asking for a bed in one of the few hospitals left in Gaza. You can imagine a world where the Palestinian would say, "It's not fair to take a hospital bed from our children and give it to you, the one with all the bombs."

Maybe this isn't a story about Jesus and his mean choice of words, or about the Syrophoenician woman and her ability to win a verbal wrestling match against the God-man himself.

Remember in the beginning of Mark, chapter 7, Jesus had just argued with his fellow Jews around their traditions of what is clean and unclean, what is pure and impure – arguing that it isn't what goes into the body that makes us unclean and defiles, but it is what comes out of the body. That it is the words and the thoughts coming from within the human heart that evil intentions come.

And then it is almost like then Jesus (Mark) says, "Watch – I'll show you." And so he steps out of Galilee into unclean gentile territory, is met by an unclean gentile woman who has a child possessed by an unclean demon. And yet Jesus comes off looking like the dirtiest dog of them all, with the defiling words that came out of his mouth. With his prejudice and limited view of household of God and who is in it. "I can't take this bread for the clean and throw it to the unclean...the dogs..." he says, to our shock.

And then, in this story, it is the supposed, presumed unclean one – the gentile mother with the sick child – who speaks the word of God to the Word of God. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs get the crumbs..."

Suddenly, through this masterful storytelling, Mark pulls back the curtain to reveal a bigger God, who blesses the crumbs and welcomes the dogs. Reveals a truer kingdom of God that Jesus has wanted us to see the whole time.

Even the dogs. Even the dogs get the crumbs. The leftovers.

After the Syrophoenician woman says those prophetic words, Jesus heads straight from there to the Decapolis – a very Gentile region – where he opens the ears of deaf man deemed unclean. And then hosts another big meal. The feeding of 4000 – this time in Gentile territory, the unclean region – with seven loaves and a few small fish (or the leftovers, the crumbs).