



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 3

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Claimed Her Place

Introduction

In this study, we have been exploring moments when Jesus saw women—moments when those women were invisible to others or perhaps could not even see themselves. *This is a different story.* In this story, Jesus comes to new sight through the instruction of a woman. Through Jesus' willingness to accept and adopt a woman's vision, we learn much about who Jesus was and is and how women were seen and received in Jesus' realm.

Jesus was on the road, having spent some time in Galilee with his disciples. While there, he was visited by Pharisees concerned about defilement—which is defined as the act of “debasement, degrading, or spoiling.” Specifically, the Pharisees expressed concern about Jesus' disciples eating with defiled hands. They were coming to the table without washing. In this story, the Pharisees are tattletales, coming to Jesus to tell on the disciples. Not washing your hands before eating was a violation of tradition, specifically “the tradition of the elders,” although it was not a violation of Scripture.

Jesus had no time for this. He met their concern with a condemnatory word from a time of great unfaithfulness for ancient Israel, when the Assyrians were besieging Jerusalem (Isa. 29:13–14). Isaiah decried those who honored God with their words while turning away in their actions. Isaiah described God's particular, pointed disgust with tyrants, scoffers, and those who caused injustice to flourish (vv. 20–21). Mark relates that Jesus went on to teach that defilement comes from *inside* a person, not from *outside*. That is, as much as the Pharisees saw and named the disciples' acts with the elevated term *defilement*, not washing your hands would not defile a person. Jesus redefined sin, seeing it in much more serious, deadly actions. He named the evils that come from the human heart as sin (Mark 7:17–23). Jesus reframed sin for his disciples, who had once again failed to understand. He placed offenses against others—violence, lying, theft, being unfaithful to one's

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partner—front and center as sin. These are the sins that result in defilement.

Getting Away to Tyre

After having a heavy conversation about purity, battling (again) with the Pharisees, and having to explain (again) to his disciples, Mark tells us that Jesus set out and went to the region of Tyre. That is a journey of at least thirty miles, and Jesus was traveling on foot. He was intent on getting away—far away. Jesus was looking for some down time apart from the sniping of religious leaders and the failure to comprehend exhibited by his followers. In traveling to a Gentile area, Jesus was, in mind and body, stretching toward a long-needed break in a place where no one would approach him for help, healing, or instruction.

“He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there” (7:24). Jesus was not looking for opportunities to proclaim the good news, heal, or do miracles. He was seeking rest. But his search for respite was foiled by a woman—a Gentile woman—who needed his help. Mark relates that Jesus, who “could not escape notice,” was heard about “immediately” by a Gentile woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit (vv. 24–25). It’s a fair assumption that, for Jesus, her arrival was not a welcome sight.

Nevertheless, there she was, appearing immediately upon hearing about his visit, bowing down at his feet, and begging him to cast out the demon from her little daughter. Note her manner of approach. She didn’t knock timidly nor wait to be invited in. Instead, she came straight to him and bowed down at his feet. This manner of approach can annoy but cannot be ignored.

Jesus’ response to her pleading has made preachers, teachers, and disciples squirm for centuries. Jesus said, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v. 27).

For those who love to sing “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear,” Jesus’ response sounds not only unfriendly but also downright unkind. It doesn’t *sound* like Jesus. What is going on here?

Jesus was tired. Yet, on other occasions when he was tired, Jesus had compassion for those in need (see 6:31–34). Jesus might be saying that Gentiles, like dogs, are unclean. But saying this immediately after lecturing

both Pharisees and his disciples about an inappropriate focus on purity seems incongruent. Perhaps he was testing the woman—but if so, this would be a singular event in the Gospels. No one else who asked Jesus for healing was tested. And if this was a test, it was quite a nasty and insulting examination. Something else was happening in this story that requires some pulling apart.

Jesus said, “Let the children be fed first.” The children in question are the children of Israel, the Jews—the chosen people of the covenant with God. Jesus first noted the time. He seems to say that he could respond, maybe, sometime later. But first he must attend to something—someone—else who, by virtue of relationship, was more important and deserving. It was commonly understood that the Messiah, God’s Anointed One, would be sent to save the Jews—and only the Jews. The Twelve, Jesus’ own disciples, believed this, as did many of the earliest leaders of the church. The Messiah would be sent for a limited mission, one that included the Jews and excluded others. The idea of Gentile inclusion in God’s salvation project would have been surprising. For many Jews, suggesting this would have been a shocking offense—one which they would have mightily resisted.

In this story, Jesus suggested that salvation might be offered to the Gentiles at some later time. That time was not now, but at some future moment after the Jewish children had all been fed. Jesus got pointed in his response. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” He equated being a Gentile with being a dog and indicated that salvation through healing was first owed to the Jews.

The Syrophenician woman was called a dog, which was an unclean animal. Dogs run in packs, scavenge for their food, and attack when hunting or threatened. Dogs were not understood or treated as pets during biblical times. They were not allowed inside homes. While some families had guard or herding dogs, they were certainly not understood as belonging to the family. In both the Old and New Testaments, when people are referred to as dogs, it is deeply rude and denigrating. The goal of such a statement is to ensure that the person addressed knows their place—that of an animal, not a person—a station from which they cannot rise.

A Mother on a Mission

But the Syrophenician woman was not finished. As a mother on a mission with a child in danger, receiving a vile insult was not going to stop her. She answered Jesus, saying, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28).

There are a few things about her response that call for exploration.

1. *This Syrophenician was a strong woman.* A lesser person—particularly one whose gender, race, and religion served to exclude them—would have heard the insult and decided that they had lost.
2. *She accepted being seen as a dog, and she responded that dogs have rights.* As scavengers, dogs are happy to be around when children eat, as food will often fall to the floor. The dogs accept the food that falls.
3. *She understood Jesus’ power and authority in ways that perhaps he did not.* She did not ask for a place at the table. She didn’t request to be viewed as one of the “children.” She didn’t ask for more than the crumbs. She did not resist the moniker of “dog” Jesus put on her, her family, and her community, and she did not argue against being given access only to the crumbs. In fact, she fought for the crumbs—for *the crumbs were enough*. Truly, *there are no crumbs*; for in Jesus, crumbs are whole, sustaining, healing loaves. Crumbs of the salvation that Jesus came to bring would heal her child.
4. *Her understanding of Jesus’ mission was broad.* The Syrophenician woman saw herself and her family as part of that mission. Even when Jesus told her she was not part of those to whom he had come—at least not among those who had primacy of place in his vocation—she saw herself as part of a more inclusive mission to which Jesus was called.
5. *She saw God offering salvation and life in abundance through Jesus.* Jesus argued from a standpoint of scarcity. There was not going to be enough healing, life, nor salvation to go around—so the children must be fed first. The food of salvation belonged to the children. If there was something left over—or when it became clear that the children were full—perhaps then the dogs would be fed.

The Syrophenician woman saw God, and herself, differently. That is, the *theology* she shared

in this healing story was different from the one Jesus shared. Her dog-talk was actually God-talk. Her sense of God, God’s power, God’s love and compassion was expansive, lavish, abundant. Although we cannot peek behind the curtain to see what in her backstory brought her to this understanding, we do see that her beliefs were sufficiently strong that she was willing to challenge Jesus.

6. *She was used to, and ready for, mansplaining.* She approached Jesus respectfully, bowed at his feet, told her story, and asked for help. Jesus did not just tell her no. He shared why he refused her request and threw in a deep, profound insult for free. His response certainly wasn’t what she hoped to hear, but it was not unexpected.

The Syrophenician woman would have been accustomed to people regularly refusing her requests for help. Her gender, her race, and her religion—any of these—would have moved many Jews to avoid contact, and openly assisting her was out of the question for those who avoided defilement. Any person in her position would know that there was a good chance that Jesus would refuse to help.

His mansplaining attitude surely came as no surprise. Even the insult was probably something she had heard before. The surprise was that she was prepared to respond.

One final surprise in this story occurred in Jesus’ reaction to her rejoinder. No less tired, no less desirous of time away, no less ready for a serious break, and having refused and insulted this woman—Jesus turned. Jesus changed his mind. Jesus said, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter” (v. 29). Jesus accepted her argument, her logic—her theologic. It made sense when considering what he knew about God. He responded not with anger but with the saving grace of healing she and her family needed. In the end, *Jesus saw her*. It was the appropriate response to her faith in Jesus’ power and God’s compassion.

The evangelist Mark gives to the Syrophenician woman—and not Jesus!—the right to claim her own place inside the household of God’s salvation. She belongs there, and she gets to claim her place in it. No one from Israel, not even Jesus, gets to “allow” her in—she, a pagan woman, gets to claim it for herself. She belongs.

What Does This Mean for Us Today?

The struggle in this passage occurs and ends in so few words that we must pay close attention, lest we fail to see what is at stake.

The message of finding the appropriate time and the warning to stop pushing—these are well known to the oppressed. The sense that other issues, other more deserving persons, must be attended first is commonly heard during social struggles. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote about this in his small and memorable volume *Why We Can't Wait*. The book followed the publication of a famous letter Dr. King wrote in response to white male religious leaders who urged patience in the struggle for racial justice. King spoke of the unlikelihood of privileged people voluntarily giving up their privileges; of the tension that is created not by those who protest and resist oppression but by the oppression itself; and of what happens when people endure years of being seen, and eventually seeing themselves, through a “degenerating sense of nobodiness.” King argued that this made waiting not only impossible but also unfaithful. The approach, manner, and speech of the Syrophenician woman sound similar notes of resisting one’s given place and seeing oneself not as a nobody but as a person of importance. She lays claim to a vision of self that is different than those in power have of her.

This story offers hope to those who feel compelled to argue with God about what would be righteous. This healing story, like a few other texts (Gen. 18:16–32, Exod. 32:9–14, 2 Kings 20:1–11), demonstrate that talking back to God and asking the Almighty for help when the divine will suggests a different way can result in liberating, life-giving change.

Further, this story helps us reflect on the spirit world. The woman’s daughter had “an unclean spirit.” Although Jesus sought to escape notice, the Syrophenician woman found him and came immediately. Could it be that the Holy Spirit found, spoke to, and moved the woman to come to Jesus? The Holy Spirit is always aware of the work, power, and activity of unclean spirits. In this story, one of the members of the Trinity, the Divine Community, helped another to come to see and understand the mission of God in more fulsome ways.

The issue of self-knowledge is important here. How we see ourselves impacts how we are seen. In Tanzania and around the world, women and girls are encouraged

to submit and to accept societal controls on their bodies, sexual decision-making, and reproductive capacities. They are taught to do as they are told. Our women students endure the daily burden of working and living with some who believe they should not be offered ordination nor even the right to study theology. They continue only through the power of God’s grace, which allows them to see themselves differently than many around them see and to understand God differently as a result.

The Syrophenician woman saw herself as worthy of salvation and healing. We can assume that she taught her daughter, healed by Jesus, to see herself in this way too. She could be called an “arrogant woman,” a type that has been criticized throughout human history. Women are often socialized to see themselves as lesser or subordinate and called to go along with the choices of men in their families, communities, and nations. The church has often encouraged women to submit to men. At times, this has tragically led to great trauma and mortal injury. Stories of this continuing reality shame the church and fail to proclaim the good news of liberation in Jesus. The existence in the Gospels of the story of an arrogant Syrophenician woman, one who taught her daughter to be arrogant as well, calls us to reflect on what it means to be faithful women and men and to relate in faithful ways.

Through their encounter and interchange, Jesus came to see the Syrophenician woman differently. Jesus, on a day of deep physical, spiritual, and mental fatigue, opened himself to learning to see. His teacher surprised him. Her gender, race, religion, and problem initially excluded her from Jesus’ vision. When he did see her clearly, this created a new perspective on Christ’s very body. Her coming to Jesus and asking him for help is remembered because she counted herself among those Jesus was sent to redeem. Her seeing made Jesus see. We are called to look around today, to see who might be in Christ’s body whom we have failed to see.

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