

# “One of the Hardest Things Jesus ever Said”

Mark 7:24-30 <sup>1</sup>

A decade or so ago, I spent about a year preaching on texts from every book of the Bible that I'd never preached on before. Sometimes there was no particular reason to have avoided or missed a passage, but at other times I noted that “You can see why I've avoided this, can't you?”

Well, even in that “passages I've avoided” effort, I avoided the text we consider today. Commentators are generally agreed that this text is the most shocking statement ever attributed to Jesus. Let's screw up our courage and see what we can make of it. I'm going to look at this text verse by verse, so you may want to keep your Bible open as we think about it.

**Mark 7:24** – *He got up and departed from there to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it, but he could not escape notice.*

One of the occupational hazards of pastoral ministry is that there's no “Off” switch. I lost count long ago of how many vacations and retreats have been interrupted, ended, or postponed because of crises and deaths among the members of the churches I've served.

That's not really a complaint, because *when people I love are having a crisis, with them is where I want to be*. Even so, the press of need sometimes becomes pretty overwhelming (not nearly so much here as in some congregations I've served). That was the situation with Jesus as our story begins.

In the previous chapter, Jesus had tried twice to get away from the crowds for a bit, because the needs were so great that He didn't even have time to eat (Mark 6:31). But both times, even when He and the disciples went to remote places, Jesus was recognized and the crowds came quickly (Mark 6:32-33, 53-55).

Now Jesus was trying for a third time to get away. He left Galilee altogether, walking northwest into the Gentile region of Tyre, and He didn't want to be found or noticed. But once again, it didn't work.

One of the significant issues raised by today's text has to do with the nature of the Incarnation—the “enfleshment” of God. The Bible tells us that Jesus was “*fully human in every way*” (Hebrews 2:17), while also telling us that “*the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily*” in Him (Colossians 2:9). Figuring out how that works and what that means has been a challenge from the very first, and it remains so, even now.

The Bible tells us that God “*never becomes faint or weary, and there is no limit to his understanding*” (Isaiah 40:28c). That's not as problematic when we think of God in the heavens as it proves to be when God, in the person of Jesus, is walking around among us. In our text,

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 15, 2017. Parallel passage is Matthew 15:21-28.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version; PHEME PERKINS, “Mark,” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, volume VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

Jesus wasn't "on mission." He was "on vacation," and He really didn't want to be bothered . . . but it didn't work. *He could not escape notice.*

**Mark 7:25-26** – *Instead, immediately after hearing about him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth, and she was asking him to cast the demon out of her daughter.*

The focus of this encounter, and the focus of our consideration this morning, is not really on the situation with this woman's daughter. We've looked at the matter of "unclean spirits" and "demons" before, and there's not time to go over that this morning. Perhaps I can remember to attach that sermon to the online version of this one. The focus in this passage is clearly on the fact that this woman is a Gentile, not a Jew.

In those days, the city of Tyre was a wealthy center of commerce, and this woman may have been a woman of means from the city. All the text tells us is that Jesus was in "the region of Tyre," which may have meant no more than that he was somewhere in the "county" of which Tyre was the "county seat," to use today's language. The woman may have been wealthy. She may have been a peasant. We just don't know; but Mark takes pains to point out that she was a Gentile.<sup>2</sup>

Jews, of course, typically didn't have dealings with Gentiles, because Gentiles were regarded as "unclean" just because they were Gentiles. Whether a Gentile was a person of good character was regarded as irrelevant. If a person was a Gentile, then they were unclean. Case closed. Sadly, we have no difficulty finding current examples of the same attitude.

Gentiles, of course, were well aware of how the Jews regarded them, and so it was no easy thing for a Gentile woman to come to Jesus for help, whether she was rich or poor. And then, when she got to Jesus, this woman "*fell at his feet*" in abject humility before Him. The only other time that happened in Mark was when Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, fell before Jesus, also seeking help for his daughter (Mark 5:22). And now we come to the hard part . . .

**Mark 7:27** – *He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, because it isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."*

Well, okay. So what do you do with that? If Jesus were merely human, worn out, and having His vacation interrupted by a beggar, a snappy, rude reply might be excused. But this reply seems on the face of it to be not just rude, but insulting. It's a crude rejoinder such as what we might expect to see on *Twitter* these days; but it's NOT something we expect from Jesus.

If Jesus had been speaking to the Scribes and Pharisees, we'd have no problem. "They deserve it," we'd think. But here is a distraught woman, pleading for her daughter, as many others have done and will do with Jesus. In all the other cases, Jesus is kind and compassionate. Here . . . well, there just doesn't seem to be any excuse for this insult.

How we consider such a problem as this is governed by how we understand what the Bible is and by how we understand who Jesus is. Some quickly dismiss this encounter as simple human rudeness, because they regard Jesus as simply a slightly-better-than-average human. There's nothing divine about Him.

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<sup>2</sup> Tradition gives the woman the name, "Justa," and her daughter the name, "Bernice."

But if we believe that “*All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness*” (2 Timothy 3:16), we can’t just dismiss this story. And if we believe the Bible’s affirmation that Jesus was “*tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15), then we either have to conclude that rudeness is not sinful or else we have to find some other way to understand this. You see why I’ve avoided this story.

One potentially helpful approach is to wrestle with the nature of the Incarnation. If Jesus truly was fully human, having divested Himself of many of His rights as God, as Paul tells us that He did (Philippians 2:7), then perhaps there was some kind of “learning curve” as Jesus grew from childhood to adulthood.

It’s clear that Jesus was theologically precocious as early as age 12 (Luke 2:41-50), but some wonder whether there was learning involved in coming to see the Kingdom of God as larger than Israel. Maybe Jesus’ encounter with this persistent Gentile woman helped Him to have a larger understanding.

Although such an approach may seem helpful at first, it fails to take seriously the fact that Jesus had already been preaching, teaching, and healing among the Gentiles before He met this woman (Mark 5:1-20). And even in this problematic reply, Jesus implied that, while “the children” (Israel) must be “fed first,” there will be a time for “the dogs” (Gentiles), too.<sup>3</sup>

While there will always be parts of Scripture that we understand imperfectly, and sometimes we do have to settle for “understanding better by and by,” I think there are some clues in this story that at least diminish the problem. The clues are not apparent in English translations, but in the Greek text itself there are some interesting nuances.

I think we have to acknowledge that to call someone “a dog” in biblical times would have almost always been an insult, not unlike using “the N word” today.<sup>4</sup> And to call someone “a dog” would seldom be a compliment today, either. At the same time, you and I feel very differently about wild, feral dogs as compared with the domesticated dogs we keep as pets, and this distinction was known in biblical times as well.

It helps to discover that the word Jesus used was not the word for a wild, feral dog. He used the word that referred to house dogs. Indeed, the word He used could almost be translated “doggie” or “puppy.” In addition to this, the text doesn’t give us the non-verbal cues such as Jesus’ tone of voice or the look in His eye. For example, I could call you “an old rascal” in a way that communicates affection or I could do it in a way that communicates contempt. We can’t tell from the text we have.

It may have been that Jesus had a twinkle in His eye as He essentially told the woman, “Now you know what we Jews are supposed to think of you Gentiles. You know we are not to have any contact with you or your people; and you’re bold enough to ask me to give to you a share in that bounty God has uniquely prepared for the Jews?” I’m inclined to think that Jesus’ comment was rather like this; and the woman’s response to Jesus gives us another clue about what was really going on here . . . .

**Mark 7:28** – *But she replied to him,  
“Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”*

<sup>3</sup> See also Acts 13:46; Romans 1:16, 2:9-10.

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Samuel 17:43; Proverbs 26:11; Ecclesiastes 9:4; Isaiah 56:10-11; Matthew 7:6; Philippians

Now in the first place, we can notice that the woman doesn't seem to have taken offense at Jesus' answer. Perhaps she was just so desperate to secure healing for her daughter that being insulted was not an option; but the fact is that she picked up on Jesus' play on words and responded in kind, in the kind of repartee that might occur between friends.

This woman was clever and she was insightful, even under extreme duress. Jesus' disciples seldom got His point without private explanation, and the Scribes and Pharisees seldom understood His meaning at all, but this woman understood at once, and she joined Jesus in this verbal dance.

This woman was humble—she did fall at Jesus' feet to make her plea—but she was not a doormat. She aggressively sought His help, and she would not accept “no” for an answer. In this, she was like the men who courageously dug through the roof to lower their friend to Jesus (Luke 5:19). She was like the woman who shamelessly pushed through the crowd until she could touch Jesus' garment and be healed (Luke 8:45). She was like the widow who relentlessly came to the judge every single day seeking justice until justice was done (Luke 18:2-5). This woman knew she had no claim on Jesus, but she was determined that He was going to help her.

It's also noteworthy that when the woman made her witty-but-humble reply, she addressed Jesus as “Lord.” While it is possible for the word she used—*Kyrie*, like *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord, have Mercy)—to mean simply, “Sir,” it only has that meaning about 2% of the time in the Bible. Almost always, *Kyrie* is a form of address used for God.

**Mark 7:29** – *“Because of this reply, you may go. The demon has left your daughter.”*

English translations generally style Jesus's statement in this verse as “because of this reply,” “because of this response,” or “because of this answer.” But what Jesus literally said was *“Because of this **word**,”* which almost certainly refers to “Lord.”

Matthew's version of this encounter (15:21-28) includes the same words on which this interpretation hinges, and Matthew also noted that Jesus affirmed the woman's “great faith.” Jesus implied here what would be made explicit later, that **we are made right with God and find healing within and without through faith, not through connections, achievements, or pedigree** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

While Jesus did not speak an explicit word of healing, He announced that the woman's daughter had been healed in that very moment because of her mother's faith. The Gospels record only two other healings at a distance—of a centurion's servant and of an official's son—and all three of these persons were Gentiles (Matthew 8:5-13/Luke 7:1-10; John 4:46-54).

**Mark 7:30** – *When she went back to her home, she found her child lying on the bed, and the demon was gone.*

The woman took Jesus at His word and trusted that her daughter was healed. She didn't try to persuade Him to come to the house, “just to be sure.”

And so, in the end, this Gentile woman is a beautiful example of humble, trusting faith that believes Jesus is truly LORD. The disciples had a lot of trouble being humble enough to receive God's Kingdom “as little children” (Mark 10:15); this wise woman had no qualms about receiving the Kingdom “like a little puppy” with its Master.

In the vignette just prior to today's text, Jesus had pronounced all foods clean: *“Nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile him but the things that come out of a person are*

*what defile him*” (Mark7:15). Here, Jesus’ actions declared all people clean, if our hearts are humble before Him who is our Lord.

To bring this story home, none of us likes to be told that what we consider our own righteousness is no better than filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). We don’t like being told that, like this woman, we have no claim on God’s mercy, and that God doesn’t owe us anything—God owes us nothing at all.

You and I are easily offended, and we cling to the idea that we are “special” and worthy of God’s grace. But the Bible tells us that only those who come empty-handed will find themselves welcome in God’s house. Jesus sends no one away empty except those who are full of themselves. As the old hymn puts it, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus may have been seeking respite in Gentile lands to regather His strength for the week of His Passion. This woman knew nothing of that; but in her heart, she knew that “the hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.”<sup>6</sup>

That King, my friends, is here today. That King, my friends, is still our Healer. That King, my friends, is our Hope, our Peace, and our Righteousness. But we can have nothing in our hands when we stand before Him.

*What can wash away my Sin? Nothing but the Blood of Jesus.*

*What can make me whole again? Nothing but the Blood of Jesus.*<sup>7</sup>

As this woman came to Jesus long ago, will you come to Him, today?

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<sup>5</sup> Augustus Toplady, *Rock of Ages*

<sup>6</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, spoken of Aragorn, but also with symbolic reference to Christ, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 169.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Lowry, *Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*