

Bread for Dogs

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you've ever heard the phrase, I'm not perfect, I've got my faults, but I'm basically good at heart. What do you think Jesus would say to someone who said that?

If you just read Mark 7, 21-23, Jesus would say something that might be considered quite offensive. He would agree with the first two assertions.

They're not perfect. They do have faults. But would then say, no, you're not basically good at heart. For the heart is the source of all our faults and imperfections. Listen to his assessment of a natural person's heart. What comes out of a person is what defiles him.

For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

[1 : 05] All these evils come from within. And they defile a person. Mark 7, 20-23. If you're anything like me, you would have been startled by what Jesus says in today's passage as well.

It sounds harsh. It sounds wrong. Did Jesus really say that? When this woman, desperate for the healing of a daughter, pleads with Jesus to heal her, Jesus says to her, Let the children be fed first, for it's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

Is this the Jesus we thought we knew? I wonder what else Jesus says that might offend us. In Facebook world, someone can become outraged on behalf of another person.

I'm outraged that someone said that about you. Maybe we feel the same here. Outraged that Jesus would say this to this woman. One of our dangers is creating a Jesus in our own image.

Dismissing things that offend us. Or explain them away. If we spend long enough in the scriptures, there's plenty that will cause us offence. One of the important things about Bible reading is to recognise that when something offends us in God's word, then there's probably something potentially offensive in us that we need to deal with.

[2 : 36] And when we do deal with what offends us rightly before God, we will then love Jesus even more. And I pray this is the case for us today.

So let's plunge into the passage. We come face to face with a woman in desperate need. Her daughter has an unclean spirit. She comes to Jesus, falls at his feet and begs Jesus to cast it out. To drive it out. It's a heart-wrenching scene. I know that you would do anything for your child to alleviate any suffering they had. It breaks your heart to have your child anything but happy and healthy.

There are so many stories of people who grieve for their children, who are sick and suffering in so many ways. I mean, I met someone at church last Sunday who'd been through a lot.

I know when we learned of our daughter's poor eyesight, it was incredibly sad. And fortunately, we have optometrists who can profit a lot of help. But others, I know, continue to have lifelong struggles with severely autistic children.

[3 : 41] Allergies, disabilities, all manner of long-term grief. Now, notice a few things with me. Jesus is now in the region of Tyre and Sidon. It is a region to the north of Israel, Phoenicia.

And this woman is a Syrophenician. That is, the region called Phoenicia that's under the administration of Syria. The region that has two key cities in it, Tyre and Sidon.

It's a Gentile region, not Jewish. Jesus has gone to this region to escape the crowds that come to him every time they hear he's around, so they can have their ailments cured.

But no matter what he does, he cannot remain incognito. They find him out. She's a Gentile, or more literally a Greek, who would naturally speak Greek.

And notice the emphasis on this in verse 26. She is a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. This region was historically renowned for polytheism, worship of all kinds of gods with all kinds of terrible sacrifices, including child sacrifice.

[4 : 50] The daughter has an unclean spirit. Now, this should make our ears prick up. Remember what chapter 7, verses 1 to 23 has been all about.

Cleansing from being unclean and defilement. That is, uncleanness. Uncleanness. The Pharisees thought they were clean, okay with God, by strictly observing their religious practices.

They'd been condemned by Jesus as lawbreakers. Jesus didn't mince his words when he addressed them. He told them that they were actually making the word of God void by their traditions.

That is, they did away with God's word. They made the word of God of no value, no power, no use. And he is a mother whose daughter has an unclean spirit in her.

Now, when people are invaded by the demonic world, it's not pleasant. It's not good. The demons only destroy people's lives. The woman's daughter is being destroyed before her very eyes.

[5 : 58] Jesus. So she brings him to the one person she has any hope in that can help her, Jesus. And he at first turns her away.

Effectively telling her, no, he won't help. Now, we know what it feels like to be shown that we're not welcome. We're an outsider to the group. Might be the body language.

Might be the language barrier. Might be the food. Might be a million of things. Jesus says to her, let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

So many things are strange about these words of Jesus. Why does he talk about bread when she's talking about casting out an unclean spirit? And we immediately take offense at Jesus, for it sounds like he's calling her a dog, which is exactly what he's saying.

At least she recognizes that this is the case. You and I might expect her to stand up and slap Jesus in the face and then approve of her doing it. But she answered him, yes, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

[7 : 12] Verse 28. First, to be clear, in calling her a dog, he's not speaking to her in an abusive, degrading way. He does not whistle to her to come, put a leash on her, make her do demeaning things.

It's a statement of national standing. Remember, Jesus is an Israelite. And she is not an Israelite. She's not a child of Abraham by descent. She is a Gentile. And she recognizes that she has no place in receiving any of the blessings of Israel, for she is an unclean outsider.

And her daughter, having an unclean spirit, owning her very body, is a particularly unclean outsider as well. Revelation 22 speaks about those outside the kingdom of God being the dogs, the unclean. It's incredibly offensive. And at one level, it should be. For in no uncertain terms, Jesus is classifying both her and her daughter as an unclean outsider.

[8 : 23] But sometimes it takes this kind of jolt to wake us up from our slumber when we're reading God's word. For the question is, why are we offended by what Jesus says?

What shocked me this week in preparing this passage is recognizing again, more clearly again, that by rights, I have no right to receive any of the blessings of the family of Israel.

What shocked me this week was my presumption that God should include me in his household, even though I have no right to do so. I feel like, of course I belong.

I was offended on the woman's behalf, when I should have actually been shocked at my being offended by Jesus.

I'm not surprised enough that I've received the blessing of becoming a child of God, but I really should be. It's all too easy to consider ourselves as okay with God, like the Pharisees in chapter 7, by our external merit, external practice.

[9 : 33] Our long-standing has been considered good people. I still remember one person saying to me, you're going straight to heaven. And it wasn't my wife, but a neighbour, because she thought I was a pretty good bloke by one little thing I did.

But first and foremost, we need to see that our default position, before Jesus has done anything to change our hearts, is this, an unclean outsider. In my entitled mindset, I almost think it's my right to call myself a child of God, and enjoy the blessings of being one of those he's made us.

But I don't deserve it, and I could never earn it. For I am by birth a Gentile sinner. I am by birth a Gentile. I am by right a dog. I am by nature unclean before God.

By birth cut off from the people of God, just as this woman and her daughter were. I do not deserve to have Jesus do anything for me. By right, neither do any of us.

Because like this woman, I was by birth a Gentile. And what comes out of my heart, only confirms, that by rights, I'm an unclean outsider.

[10:48] And yet, that's not the end of the matter. Notice there's hope in what Jesus says. He's not precluding the dogs getting any bread. He says, let the children be fed first.

He doesn't say that there's nothing for the dogs. The kingdom of God has a priority in its coming and its growth. It's first for the Jew. Then for the Gentile.

As Romans 1 so clearly puts it. And Paul says, in Romans 1, verse 16, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

That is the Gentile, the unclean, the dog, for you and for me, who are not Jews by birth. But notice what happens. And this seems extraordinary to us, entitled, rich, powerful people.

The woman humbles herself. She recognises that Jesus was right in what he said. Yes, Lord, she said.

[11:51] She recognises who she really is. She does not stand on a high horse, get up, slap Jesus in the face because he's offended her, close the book on Jesus, walk out, and slam the door.

Something amazing happens. By recognising her place, and persistently seeing that there's some blessing that will come to the dogs, the unclean, Jesus heals her daughter, without ever going near her.

The demons cast out of the child, and the child's no longer having the unclean spirit in her. At one level, the woman and the child have fed on the bread from heaven that came first to the Jews, the children of God, and been blessed, been cleaned.

Jesus himself, we know, is the bread of life. In John chapter 5, verse 48, he says that. Jesus himself says, in John chapter 5, verse 51, I am the bread, the living bread, that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. The woman, the Gentile, the outsider, the unclean outsider, the dog, who is fed on the very word of God that gives life, fed on the bread that will be broken for her, Jesus, is by his work on the cross, that cleansing and inclusion comes.

[13:20] It's by his work on the cross, where he suffers and dies, bearing the wrath of God for our sins, that forgiveness comes. Inclusion and forgiveness. And having fed on him, the bread of life, she's now become a clean insider.

Like all of us who've humbled ourselves before Jesus and fed on him by faith, we could not earn it, we could never deserve it, but by his mercy and grace, Jesus makes the unclean outsider, the clean insider.

As he works in us by his Holy Spirit to cleanse our hearts by the washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Listen to what Titus chapter 3 verse 5 says.

Titus chapter 3 verse 5. He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Now just an important aside here, if God's Holy Spirit has possessed us, there's no room for any evil spirit to be in us. For the Holy Spirit will not tolerate an evil spirit to be near him.

[14:33] The two do not mix. Now, I'm sure that the woman and the daughter were never the same after their encounter with Jesus and the change of status that came after falling before him in desperate faith.

The Apostle Paul would visit this region a few times in his life. There'd be churches there one day. He went through Phoenicia and from Antioch encouraging the believers in Phoenicia on his way to Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15.

And later on, he stayed in Sidon and was cared for by his friends there on his journey to Rome under guard to stand before Caesar. Read about that in Acts 27 verse 3.

I wonder if Paul ever met this woman and her daughter. Now, it's not only this woman and her daughter who are made clean and come to love Jesus, but we also see people in another Gentile area loving Jesus in stark contrast to the very children of God who should love him.

Jesus moves from Tyre and goes via Sidon around the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee to the Decapolis, another Gentile region.

[15:51] In Mark chapter 5, we saw that Jesus cast out a legion of demons from a man. They went into a herd of pigs and brought destruction on the pigs by making them jump over a cliff. It's clearly an unclean region.

And we see people begging Jesus again. Begging is a key word here. Begging him to heal a man who was deaf and had speech impediment. So he probably was once hearing but had lost the ability to hear and his speech was also affected by something that prevented him from being heard clearly.

This time, Jesus touches his ears and his tongue and then he sighs. Interesting that he sighs, speaking Aramaic, the language of the Jews at the time.

Why Aramaic? I'm not sure. But what he says is be opened, not his eyes, but his ears are opened, open to hear the word of God.

And his speech impediment is gone. Some of the Pharisees would pejoratively call a dog, speaks, his mouth is opened.

[16:59] This Gentile, this unclean outsider, speaks. The kingdom of God is broken into his life. Now Isaiah 35 is a key part of the Old Testament that should be ringing in our ears.

Isaiah 35, verse 3. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, be strong, fear not.

Behold, your God will come with vengeance. With recompense of God he will come and save you.

Verse 35, verse 5, sorry, then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

Did you hear that? The tongue of the mute sing for joy. If Mark 6 was showing us that Jesus is God and Mark 7 showing us that God has come in Jesus to save and this includes the outsider, the Gentiles, you and me.

[18:16] And notice what these dogs say. They are astonished and conclude, verse 7, He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.

This man who has his tongue released uses it to praise God while the natural children who would receive the bread don't. Hear the outsiders rejoice in who Jesus is.

They welcome him with open arms. They are astonished at how gracious he is. They are astonished beyond measure that they can enjoy the blessing of God to them, the outsiders.

And yet those who think they are on the inside, the children, the Jewish leaders, speak badly of Jesus and reject the wonderful things Jesus does. Jesus is the one who can heal the outsider and make them clean.

It's clear what defiles a person before God is not what's on the outside but what comes from the inside. It's clear that as Jesus speaks he does so in ways that really should get under our skin shaking us out of our comfort zones.

[19:34] And so today I trust that this happened to us. It's the constant refrain throughout the gospel going out to the nations. The constant wonderful surprise that God's kingdom, that God's rescue mission embraces the unclean outsider who falls on their knees humbly before him.

Two of the sins that comes out of the heart we see in Mark 7 22 are those of pride and foolishness. The proud would slap Jesus in the face for saying what he says to them, assessing that they are all good with God, that they are basically good at heart.

But the humble will recognise that they are sinners and feed on Jesus the true bread from heaven by faith and ask him to cleanse them from their uncleanness and forgive them.

The proud would slap Jesus in the face for saying what he says to them and foolishly fall back on their outward performance. God is to those who recognise their unworthiness to approach Jesus.

It's those who humble and come before him and beg him to cleanse them, to heal them, that he includes as clean insiders. My prayer is that we would never be foolish or proud in our stands before Jesus, but they would always submit to what he says in his word.

[20:59] As we see with ever more clarity how our standing with God has been won, may it be that we'll always be astonished beyond measure at what Jesus has done for us.

May it be that our tongues are free to conclude that Jesus has done all things well, even when his words may at first offend us.