

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
THE CRUMBS OF GOD'S GRACE
Mark 7:24-30**

“It is not right,” said Jesus, “to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). Wow! That is a stunner, isn’t it? I don’t know any way to get around it. This is a very hard saying. Why would Jesus say something like this? Was He a racist? Was He prejudiced against non-Jews? Did He mean that the Jews are better than other people? Was He claiming some sort of superiority – moral, spiritual, or ethnic – for the Jews? That’s how it appears in this instance, at least on the surface. Was Jesus prejudiced? It is an uncomfortable thing to consider.

Let’s look at the story and see if we can gain some insight. Jesus had left Galilee, where He spent so much time and invested so much of Himself in the disciples and in ministry to others. He had gone to Phoenicia, to the area of Tyre and Sidon, two towns on the Mediterranean coast northwest of the Sea of Galilee. This was Gentile country. It was beyond the boundaries of Galilee. Today it is part of Lebanon. It was Gentile country – which is to say, most of the people who lived there were not Jews, ethnically or religiously. Jews, particularly Jews who were especially devout (like the Pharisees) tried very religiously to avoid any interaction with non-Jews.

Jesus went to Tyre on purpose, to get out of the public eye. He needed some R & R, which is one of many indications of His humanness. Jesus got tired, just like us. He was hoping for a little time to get recharged and refreshed – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He didn’t want anyone to know He was there. He was hoping He could be incognito. But it didn’t work out that way. His fame had spread beyond the borders of Galilee and Judea. And He couldn’t keep His presence in Phoenicia a secret. Somebody recognized Him and the word spread.

When she heard He was there, this woman sought Him out. She was a Greek-speaking Gentile who had been born and raised there in Phoenicia. Her heart was heavy, because her daughter was in bad shape, afflicted by a demon. She came to Jesus, fell to her knees, and begged Him to help. Her daughter meant more to her than anything in the world, and, more than anything, she wanted Jesus to heal her.

If you’re a parent (or even if you aren’t), you can understand this. As Tim Keller says: “If your child is in jeopardy, you simply do what it takes to save (the child)” (Keller, *King’s Cross*, 86). You will do anything and everything you can for the well-being of your child.

This woman – this child’s mother – wanted Jesus to make her little girl well. And she was not about to take “No” for an answer!

But how did Jesus respond to her plea? With these perplexing words: “Let the children eat first, for it is not right to take the bread out of their mouths and throw it to the dogs.”

Ouch! It sounds so unlike Jesus.

But notice what happens next. Notice how the woman reacts. She is not put off by what Jesus said. She doesn't take offense at His words. Some of you have read the book *Unoffendable* by Brant Hansen. We might all benefit from reading it. Today it seems like just about everybody (not us, of course! ☺) can get offended about just about anything. And too often, they (we) do. From our vantage point, it seems like this woman could easily have been offended by what Jesus said. But she wasn't. She didn't get angry. She didn't protest. She didn't accuse Him of being prejudiced. She didn't take offense at His analogy of the children (meaning the Jews) and the dogs (referring to Gentiles or non-Jews).

It is not what we would expect to happen if this conversation were to take place today. But how does she respond? She says, in effect: “Lord, what You say is true. I'm not going to argue with you. But even the family dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the table, don't they? Don't the little pups get to enjoy the scraps of food that are left over?”

Jesus, impressed by her persistence and the obvious depth of her faith, says to her: “That is a great answer! You can be on your way now, because your daughter has been healed.” And she was, right then, at that very moment. “She went home,” says Mark, “and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone” (7:30).

This woman is like another Gentile in the Gospels, the Roman centurion who came to see Jesus because his servant was on his death bed. Both Matthew (8:5-13) and Luke (7:1-10) tell the story. When Jesus offered to come and heal Him, the centurion responded by telling Jesus that, as a Roman officer, he was a man under authority who carried out orders given by his superiors, and who gave orders to the soldiers under him, and they did what he told them to do. He asked Jesus to just say the word, and his servant would be healed. It wasn't necessary for Jesus to be physically present to heal the servant. The centurion believed Jesus could just say the word, and it would be done. Jesus was amazed and said: “I have not seen such great faith like this anywhere in Israel” (Luke 7: 9). And the centurion's servant was healed at that moment (Matthew 8:13).

Both stories have a happy ending. Both stories demonstrate both the gift of faith and the healing power of Jesus. But there is still this troubling saying in the story of the Gentile woman and her demonically oppressed daughter about the children and the dogs.

In his book *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, F.F. Bruce acknowledges that it is a hard saying, but points out that it is not so hard that it put off the woman. It may have been bothersome, but it was not enough to cause her to get mad or give up and go away.

To us today it is a particularly hard saying, I think, for two reasons. First, because it seems so inconsistent with the character of Jesus. It seems so out-of-character for Him to

dismiss someone in this way. We might expect a comment like that from other people, or at least not be surprised by it, but not from Jesus. And second, because we are so sensitized to issues of prejudice in our culture. Which is a good thing. We *should* be on our guard against being prejudiced against people who are different from us, recognizing that all persons are equal in value because we are all created in the image of God and loved by God. At the same time, though, we must be careful not to become so overly sensitive that we read prejudice or hatred into situations where it doesn't exist. If you cry "Wolf!" over and over when there is no wolf, well, you know what will happen when there really is a wolf.

So, what are we to make of this encounter between Jesus and this woman? Let me try to make two important points to put it in proper perspective.

DOGS

The first has to do with the word "dogs." Just like today, to call someone a "dog" back then was not a term of endearment. It was not a compliment. It was a term of contempt or derision. It was an insult any way you look at it.

If, for example, the leaders of the Taliban in Afghanistan were to refer to the people of our country or the leaders of our government as "dogs," we would understand implicitly that they were not paying us a compliment.

In the Middle Eastern culture of Jesus' day, dogs were hardly thought of as man's best friend. For the most part, they didn't view dogs with the same kind of affection many of us do today. They didn't value dogs as pets and companions and guardians the way we do.

The Greek word for "dog" (*kuon*) is used only five times in the New Testament, mostly (four out of five times) in a figurative sense and not as a compliment. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:6, Jesus says: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to swine." What Jesus means, obviously, is that we should not entrust what is holy to people who are unholy or ungodly. We must not entrust the things of God to people who don't appreciate those things and who will not treat the things of God with reverence. Jesus is saying that we need to be discriminating. Not in a bad way, but in a good way.

Paul uses the word *kuon* in Philippians 3:2, where he says: "Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh." Not a very complimentary thing to say. Paul is talking about people known as Judaizers. Judaizers were Jewish Christians who wrongly insisted that Gentiles (non-Jews) had to follow all the rules and regulations of Judaism, including circumcision, in order to receive salvation. To become a Christian, they said, a Gentile had to become a Jew first. Only after submitting to all the Jewish rules and regulations could a Gentile become a Christian and receive the gift of salvation.

Paul said they were wrong. You can tell by the language he uses that he felt strongly about it. He insisted that justification is by grace alone through faith alone. Not faith in Christ plus anything else. No. “It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith. And this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Twice in this letter to the Galatians, Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision (as a symbol of one’s adherence to the whole Jewish law) means anything. What counts, he says, is faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:6) and being made new from the inside out (6:15) – which comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Peter uses the word “dog” in 2 Peter 2:22, where he quotes from Proverbs 26:11: “A dog returns to its vomit.” Peter has in mind people who get close to faith in Jesus, who hear and grasp the meaning of the gospel but then turn away and reject it. They reject Jesus and all He offers and go back, as it were, to living in their own vomit all over again. It is not a very pretty word-picture, is it?

Jesus Himself uses the word in the last chapter of the Bible, in Revelation 22:15, where He says: “Outside are the dogs” What He means is that outside the city of God – outside the place where the people of God dwell with God – are those who persist in a lifestyle of rebellion against God, who live a God-less life. For them, for all who refuse to repent and turn in trusting faith to Jesus, there is no place in the kingdom of God. The “dogs” are left on the outside.

That gives you a sense of how the word *kuon* is used in the New Testament. It is used in one other place, Luke 16:21, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, where Jesus describes dogs licking the sores of Lazarus.

The word Jesus uses in conversation with this Gentile woman is not exactly a compliment, but it is more endearing than *kuon*. Jesus takes a bit of the sting out of it because He uses the word *kunarium*, the word for “little dogs” or “puppies” – the children’s household playmates.

His choice of words would soften the bite at least a little. There may also have been something about the way Jesus spoke to the woman that encouraged her not to take offense. Maybe there was something in His tone of voice, or the expression on His face. Mary Sue and I have enjoyed watching the online series about Jesus called *The Chosen*. Some of you may have seen it, too. One of the things I love about it is the way it portrays Jesus, with a very real, down-to-earth sense of humor and compassion in different situations. I can imagine a twinkle in His eye as He talks with this woman.

That twinkle in His eye is not obvious from the record we have in the Gospels. But I suspect there was something that made this woman see that Jesus wasn’t really rejecting her, that He was just testing her faith and resolve, and that He didn’t want her to give up. He didn’t want her to be put off by His analogy of the children and the dogs.

And, to her credit, she didn’t give up and walk away.

If we were to conduct a poll today, my guess is that some of you – many of you, perhaps – would admit to being dog lovers. Our son Nate and his wife Amy have a Shiba Inu – a breed of dog originally from Japan – named Toshi that they just adore. We had a tall Sheltie named Bailey who was part of our family for 13 years. Mary Sue grew up in a “dog family.” From as early as she can remember and probably before that, her family had a long history of dogs – all mixed breeds, some part collies and some mixed labs. Whatever they were, at suppertime you could always find the dog under the dinner table, waiting for something, for some tidbit, to fall to the floor, which would be instantly gobbled up. Mary Sue’s Dad had this mischievous streak in him and routinely played this game of discreetly taking food from his plate and reaching under the table to feed the dog without anyone noticing, but whenever Mary Sue’s Mom saw what was going on, she would scold him good-naturedly. Maybe someone in your family has done that. Maybe you have.

Sometimes the dogs didn’t wait for the crumbs to fall from the table. One of their dogs, Molly, put both paws up on the dining room table when no one was paying attention and ate a whole pan of fudge that Mary Sue’s Mom had just made. The amazing thing is that it didn’t make Molly sick. They used to say that Molly was part collie and part goat, because she had such an iron stomach she could eat just about anything, including non-edible things, and not get sick!

There is no fudge on the table in our Bible reading today, but this woman who came to Jesus had a great comeback when it seemed like He was trying to put her off. And Jesus appreciated her response. She said: “Okay, the children get to eat first, but even the little dogs under the table get to eat the children’s leftovers” (Mark 7:28).

She didn’t take offense at being called a *kunarion*, a “little dog,” if she could still receive the blessing for her daughter. And she did.

Her faith in Jesus was real. It was persistent. And it was rewarded. Her prayer was answered. Without faith, as it says in Hebrews 11:6, it is impossible to please God. *Impossible.*

FIRST

The second point I want you to see has to do with the word “first.” In verse 27, Jesus says: “First let the children eat” That word – “first” – is significant. “First,” but not exclusively, not to the exclusion of others, because first leads on to second. We must not miss the fact that Jesus did not shut the door on this Gentile woman. In terms of His analogy, the children are to be fed first, but there is enough food for the pups, too.

The spiritual application is that the gospel – the good news of salvation, the message of Jesus, the ministry of Jesus, the grace of God revealed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus – was for the Jewish people *first*.

The Jews were God's special people. God's chosen people. Chosen for blessing. Chosen to be a blessing to the world. Chosen so that from them and through them the Messiah, the Savior of the world, would come.

The blessing was to the Jews first. Not because they were better than, or superior to, any other people. That is clear from Deuteronomy 7, where Moses said to the people of Israel: "The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession. The LORD did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you" (7:6-8). God did not choose the Jewish people because they were bigger or better than any other nation, but because of His sovereign, electing love. It is as simple and as mysterious as that.

The Jewish people were chosen for blessing. But the blessing of salvation did not end with them. It was for the Jews first, but it was and is not only for the people in Jerusalem and Galilee. It is for people in Tyre and Sidon, too. And Texas and Sudan, Beirut and Baghdad and Beijing, Berlin and Buenos Aires, London and Los Angeles, New York and Nigeria and Norway and Northern Virginia. You get the idea. It is for people everywhere. If it were not so, to borrow Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 15:19, we would be of all people most to be pitied.

What does Paul say in Romans 1:16? I hope you know it by heart. If not, I urge you to commit it to memory. He says: "I am not ashamed of the gospel." Why? "Because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

The gospel, he says, is the power of God. The word for "power" is *dunamis*, from which we get the word "dynamite." The gospel is the dynamite of God. It has the power to blow sin, hatred, bitterness, pride, and prejudice right out of human hearts. It has the dynamite-power to transform the landscape of our lives and relationships, the power to make us new from the inside out.

Whose power is it? It is the power of *God*. What is it for? *Salvation*. It is power to make us right with God. Who is this salvation for? *Everyone who believes*. Everyone. Who. Believes.

It was *first* for the Jews. But not just for them, as if it were for an exclusive group. *Then* for the Gentiles (non-Jews), which includes just about all of us here today.

This woman who came to Jesus to plead for her daughter didn't object that the Jews should benefit first. It didn't bother her that they should get the children's bread, because by faith in Jesus she perceived that even the crumbs from the table – the crumbs of God's grace – would be enough to answer her plea. Even the crumbs.

Here is a truth to take hold of: Even the crumbs of God's grace are more satisfying than all the platters of wealth and health and talent and beauty and power and fame and applause you could ever experience in this life.

The crumbs of grace from God's table will satisfy when all these other things leave you feeling empty and longing for something more. Which is why some of the most privileged people in the world are among the most unhappy.

It didn't bother this woman that someone else got to go first.

When I was younger, I loved to play basketball. If there was a pick-up game, I didn't care if I got picked first or last (okay, maybe I didn't like being picked last), as long as I got picked and got to play. That was the important thing.

I am so thankful – eternally thankful – that whether I'm first in line (I'm not!) or way in the back, there was and is a place for me in God's kingdom. And there is a place for you – for all of us who by faith receive and take hold of the blessings of His grace.

Was Jesus a racist? Was He prejudiced against non-Jews? The answer is definitively NO! The salvation He brought is for anybody and everybody who will receive it (and Him) by faith. He died on the cross to save sinners of every race and nation and language.

Was Jesus saying that one group is somehow better and more deserving than another? No way.

The message of the New Testament is that no group and nobody is good enough. No one. Which is why we need grace. The message of the New Testament is that *grace trumps race* every single time. With no exceptions.

There is only one way to be saved. Only one way to be made right with God. Not by being of a certain race, having a certain background, or belonging to the right church. Not by being religious. Not by being baptized or going to church. None of these is enough to get you or me or anyone else into heaven. There is only one way. By grace. Through faith – the kind of genuine, persistent, trusting faith exhibited by this Gentile woman who believed (rightly) that Jesus was her last and only hope.

The “crumbs” of God's grace are for us all, including those of us who think we are beyond hope because we are not good enough and never will be. Because we've blown it too many times (who hasn't?). Because we have too many skeletons in our closet (who doesn't?).

The “crumbs” of God's grace are for us all. But you know what? It is not just the crumbs. It is the whole loaf. The bread of life is for you, for me, for everyone who will believe and receive. Jesus, in His amazing love, offers it to you ... and you ... and you ... and me.

Don't get hung up on who comes first, or who gets the first bite. Like the Gentile woman, just rejoice and give thanks that His grace is for you.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.