

9.8.24 – Mark 7:24-30, The Syrophenician Woman

We've just finished our series on Work... and before we shift our attention in a few weeks to the Old Testament, we're going to spend this week and next in the gospels, looking at the words and interactions of Jesus.

The passage we're looking at this morning, is a seemingly brief interruption, a brief encounter between Jesus and a woman who is desperate... There is a healing that takes place, but there is so much more happening in these few verses, and within this brief exchange, that deserve our full attention.

We're just coming out of the summer months, I know many of us took time to get away, take a trip, have a bit of relaxation and vacation if possible... But of course, vacations and time set aside for relaxation does not stop the world from spinning, it doesn't stop life from happening... and sometimes those times of rest can be interrupted by sudden change. By difficulty, or any kind of unexpected circumstances.

I remember about 8 or 9 years ago, Jenny and I were down in the keys just for a few days to get away... and we were at a late dinner, and received a call that a very close family friend just an hour before had a significant brain aneurysm, and was being prepped for a massive surgery.

You're interrupted... The next day we were heading home, and helping with the situation... Life interrupts, because as creatures, we are dependent beings- as humans we are sinful- and live in a fallen world. At times, we are desperate.

I want us to look at 3 points in this short passage that will guide us. They'll connect and bleed over into each other- but three big points-

1. The Context and Scene, 2. The Exchange, 3. The Desperation

1. The Context and Scene –

We have to keep in mind that when we read the gospel accounts, it can be hard to process the amount of time between scenes. And each writer does this a bit differently. Especially in the gospel of Mark. Mark is the shortest gospel account, and one of the reasons for that is because he is very interested in racing through the story, and giving you nothing but what Jesus did and said...

So, the word that is often used by Mark to move the story along, is "Immediately..." Immediately, Jesus went... Immediately, they left...

Here, in the middle of Chapter 7, we have a break and we're told...
"And from there, he arose, and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon."

We could ask a couple of questions... Where is Tyre and Sidon?
Why is Jesus leaving where he was? How long is he planning to go there for?
This is the only time, that we know of (at least from the gospels), that Jesus left his own country and went abroad. Maybe he did at other times, but this is the only time in the gospels we know of...
To build the context and scene, we need to understand what Jesus has just said and one in the earlier parts of chapter 7.

Jesus has just had this intense encounter with the Pharisees in the Galilee region... on the subject of cleanness and purity... Jesus is approached by the pharisees who ask, *"Hey, everyone does the purity hand washing before they eat... how come your disciples don't wash their hands?"*
"How come they are not walking in our traditions?"

And Jesus has a VERY stern reply – he quotes the prophet Isaiah, those famous words, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me..."
And Jesus goes on to dissect their "traditions," as being counter to the Word of God... And then he turns to the crowd, with the pharisees there... and says, it's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him... it's what comes out of a man's mouth... In other words, it is not the external things of the world – certain foods, or practices, that make us unclean, it is what we carry inside... the sinful nature within... And the disciples are confused by this...

So, what does Jesus do as the pressure mounts around him...
He wants to get away. He needs a break... Essentially, he goes on holiday.
And he goes outside of his home country, to the region of Tyre and Sidon, which would be in modern day Lebanon. And the purpose of this trip we believe, is to rest, but also to teach the twelve disciples...
To get away from the crowds... to go somewhere the crowds won't be an issue... and he can spend some quality time teaching his disciples about some of the very difficult things he has said in recent times.

Some bible scholars refer to this period as the Retirement Ministry... meaning there's a shift from the ministry that precedes it, this time of ministry with great crowds in the Capernaum area of Galilee...
There will still be crowds that find him in this next period, but most of the emphasis is on Jesus' time with his disciples.

And so, to accomplish this, Jesus seeks out mostly Gentile locations... to get away a bit from the people... to teach his students.

So, they come to the city of Tyre... This was an ancient city that is referred to often in the Bible, often in the Old Testament. Tyre once had an alliance with King David and King Solomon... It furnished timber and they were known for their skilled artisans... But it was also Tyre that introduced Baal worship into Israel... Interestingly enough, in the Old Testament, Tyre was an island city, just off the coast line about a mile or so... But, by the time of Jesus, and still today, it is no longer an island but part of a peninsula... and we can thank Alexander the Great for that.

Young Alex, was conquering most of the known world, and in 332 BC he wants the import harbor city of Tyre... and so he lays siege, but he cannot effectively get to Tyre because it is an island... so what does he do? Well, the water wasn't very deep, so he builds a kilometer long, 200 feet wide causeway... a natural land bridge... Forever changing the landscape and the city of Tyre.

Jesus had been preaching along the shoreline of Galilee, now he retreats northwest to the coastline of Phoenicia... for a time of rest and preparation...

However, there are Jews of course in Tyre... some at least... and it appears that Jesus has become known there as well.. because we're told that he is in a home in this scene... so someone had to know him, or welcome them to stay... Word had spread far and wide of Jesus... so even though he was desiring a time to rest or be concealed... he can't keep it completely at bay...

And into this home where Jesus is... a woman interrupts him. Remember, Jesus has just earlier in the chapter given this fresh view of cleanness and uncleanness... and now here is a woman, who has a daughter with an unclean spirit.... To the Pharisees, Jesus has essentially shattered their religious identity code.... And now in a Gentile city... he will actually act out what he has just said to the Pharisees...

So, 2. Let's look at The Exchange -

v. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ And he said 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."

This statement of Jesus is often included in a bucket we refer to as "the hard sayings of Jesus." And that makes sense, because here Jesus seems to refer to this

woman, and all Gentiles... as dogs... In the ancient near east, especially Jewish culture, dogs would have always been seen as unclean animals...

Many scholars have tried to parse what Jesus is meaning here...
is he quoting an ancient proverb? Does he really think Gentiles are dogs?
Is he anti-Gentile... Does he believe in a kind of Jewish superiority?

One thing we can take from this... The Christian Church of course is a largely Gentile church, and has been since the early centuries after Christ... Mark's audience for this gospel were in a Gentile city... So, the fact he includes this exchange, which doesn't cast Gentiles in the most favorable light... is a strong point for the reliability of his account.

That we can trust these ARE the words of Jesus.

Mark makes it very clear that this woman is NOT a Jew- two clarifying statements – She is a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth... Jesus is saying here, the Jews are children, and the Gentiles are the dogs... This certainly could have been a “saying,” familiar to Jews... or an “insult” essentially referring to unwanted bread not even being worth saving for the dogs...

In Matthew's account of this scene, which... just a reminder, that many of the gospels write about the same stories and scenes, but they do it in different ways, and emphasize different things? Why? Because of their purpose and who their audience is... Matthew's focus is on writing to Jewish people.

Mark's focus is in writing to people in the city of Rome...

So, in Matthew's account, he includes these words of Jesus...

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

And here, he says... ²⁷ *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”*

Jesus has been clear throughout his ministry, that his mission is to the people of Israel. To the Jews first. God chose the people of Israel in a special, covenant-relationship as his elect people.

The blessings of God flow to the people of Israel... The apostle Paul spends a lot of time on this in his letter to the Romans- even as an apostle to the Gentiles... he talks about how the gospel is for the Jew first, and Gentiles come from the ROOT of God's covenant with the Jews...

But though this is the case... throughout the Bible... throughout the Old Testament... There are small glimpses of God's plan for all peoples of the earth, Jew and Gentile alike, to reap the benefits of His blessings...

John Calvin, the great reformer wrote this:

– *“At no time, did God shut up his grace among the Jews in such a manner as not to bestow a small taste of it on the Gentiles.”*

If you read the Psalms, you will see glimpses of a future that is to come with all the nations of the world will be blessed by God's presence.

And of course, when Israel began... when God called Abraham into this special covenant relationship- what did he promise him?

That *“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

I had a professor in seminary use this analogy, Dr. Richard Pratt... and it has always stuck with me...

Many houses, especially when they're older in age... have had considerable work done to them. They have been renovated... they have been added onto... My own house has an old patio that was closed in to make a kind of Florida room... And it is almost always obvious in these older homes where the original house was, and where the addition begins. There was an original floorplan... and then there is an addition, and most always it is very obvious where that begins...

And Dr. Pratt said, the original floor plan for the mission of God includes the Gentiles. The New Testament, the day of Pentecost... the Christian church in a place called Florida 2,000 years later, is not an addition to Gods plan, it WAS the plan. It IS the plan...

The day of Pentecost, Acts. 2 – is when the Church became international... but that day was foreshadowed... with exceptions at different points in time... including even this scene we're looking at.

So, then why does Jesus say what he says? His mission is first to the Jews, to fulfill scripture... to bring them even to judgment for their rejection of God's prophets, and ultimately himself... and to make a way for Gentiles to be grafted into the promises of God as His covenant people.

Jesus says this seemingly harsh thing to her... but there must have been something in the way he said it... that made her keep pushing... Perhaps, it's the word, "first..." Jesus says, "first let the children be fed, then the dogs..."

Something encourages her to continue in this exchange with this very clever response... "v. 28 *she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet.... even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

It's as if she knows... Yes... but we have always been blessed through God's people... little blessings... little glimpses... She hears Jesus essentially refer to her as a dog... And yet, she accepts it... and puts herself directly in his hands in faith.

It appears that Jesus is taken aback by her words- ²⁹ *And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter."* ³⁰ *And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.*

An outsider, a Gentile, a Syrophenician foreigner, a woman, perhaps a widow... and a widow with an unclean child! She experiences the generous healing and benefits of God's presence. She returns home and the daughter is well.

Jesus was hoping to get away with his disciples.... To explain to them all that he has been saying... and right into the room they are interrupted by the desperate faith of this woman- that breaks down the barriers that human sin constructs for itself.

We've looked first at 1. The Context and Scene, secondly 2. At The Exchange, but finally this morning to close, I want us to look a little closer-

3. At the Desperation.

We're told this woman knew who Jesus was... fell at his feet in a heap... and begged him. Matthew's account tells us that she cries out for mercy... and she says, "Lord! Help me." Her situation... leads her to absolute desperation. And, I think we understand that... If you've been a parent, and something inexplicable is happening to your child... it will lead you to panic and desperation.

It will send you to your knees in desperation.

And this woman, who as we've already said, would fall outside of every social, political, and religious barrier... in this God-given desperate faith, she falls in front of Jesus... and when he gives her an opening...

He gives her a finger of hope... she takes the whole hand... “Am I a dog!? I accept it... if through your mercy a crumb of your blessing and grace would fall to me.”

On her face, in this act of prostration... all of her humility, anxiety, and desperation is on display... and Jesus responds, “*Woman, you have great faith. ... For what you have said... go, your child is healed.*”

Later in Mark’s gospel, as Jesus dies on the cross... a Roman centurion... another Gentile, outside of God’s covenant family... looks upon Jesus there, and says, truly this man was the son of God... these are the glimpses that God’s mission would be for the whole world... and when the Spirit of God fills the room at Pentecost... the grace and mercy and blessing of God goes out to the whole world... even you and I.

And so we find ourselves... perhaps at times, in a place of desperation... When the world collapses on us. When we have no explanation for what is happening...

I read an account this week of a woman’s traumatic story of having brain cancer. She described that in the particular brain surgery she had to remove a tumor, she would need to have local anesthetics first so that she could be awaked DURING the operation... in order to save her brains speech faculties... she described the utter desperation of that moment and the confusion and the chaos of being desperate for Jesus to be with her...

Perhaps you’ve experienced the kind of desperation that would send you to the feet of Jesus crying, “help me.” But I think there is another kind of desperation... perhaps a more modern desperation that many of us live with...

For about 10 years I lead a local Book Club in Fort Lauderdale... It’s a great memory. People from church. Some Barnes and Noble employees. One of the most surprising books that we read- one that has always stuck with me, is *Babbit*, written in the 1920s by Sinclair Lewis.

It’s a subtle book. It’s about a man who is dealing with his insecurities... He’s leading the quintessential American, upper middle class life- but he feels there’s something missing in his life, and so he makes some minor adjustments... changes his views on a few things... he rebels a bit with some small intellectual and social things, in order to feel a bit more alive... but ultimately, he kind of goes back to what he knew before... he doesn’t have all the courage he needs to follow

some of those rebellions further... and he settles back into his normal social and professional life.

IN many of Sinclair Lewis's books, not a whole lot happens... There are not great scenes of action... he largely writes about Americans who simply give into a life of conformity. We join the cultural herd, if you will. What's interesting though, is that in the middle part of the 20th century... many literary critics cast Lewis aside... Not seeing the value of his writing... it was out of step with the more raucous and entertainment driven culture of the times.

However, Lewis was concerned with conformity and how it shapes American life... and way before TV, or the internet, or social media... his characters suffered from what we now call, FOMO... Fear of Missing Out. Fear of not being noticed... Lewis now is sometimes referred to as a kind of American Prophet... One writer says this, "*A hundred years before Social Media, George Babbitt, and Lewis's other characters were valiantly trying to curate their public personas and paper over the cracks in their personal selves.*"

Lewis was tapping into that famous Henry David Thoreau line from On Walden Pond: "*The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation...*"

There are moments of great desperations that lead us to the feet of Jesus... but perhaps many of us are living with this kind of quiet desperation... this fear of missing out on what everyone else has... This internal dialogue within ourselves wondering if we're good enough, or being noticed enough... If we've made the right decisions in life... And day by day, while there may be no crisis... there is a simmering quiet desperation... that friends... We need to bring to Jesus too.

Because whether we are loudly desperate... emotionally desperate... or whether we are quietly desperate... brooding on the inside... The only place in which the fullness of God's blessings can flow to us, is at the feet of Jesus. It is standing with the Roman Centurion... and saying... he is the only one. It is falling with the Syrophenician woman... and saying, Jesus you are the only one...

In desperate faith... we are to seek Jesus... We are to experience the blessings that can only flow through him... Not the promises of the world... Not the disappointments of the past... or the confusion of the present...

He will meet us there... and send us home in healing and joy. **Let's Pray.**