Mark Lesson 22 (2022)

**JESUS HONORS A GENTILE WOMAN’S FAITH**

*(Subtitle: For Such a Reply)*

Mark 7:24-30

Key Verse: 7:29

“Then he told her, ‘For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.’”

 Mark 7:24-8:21 is a new section. In this section, we see that as the hostility of Jewish leaders increased, Jesus left Galilee with his disciples and went to the Gentile region, where he ministered to the non-Jewish people. He drove the impure spirit out of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter (24-30), healed a deaf and mute man around Decapolis (31-38), and fed the four thousand people miraculously in the same place (8:1-13). This trip must have taken at least several weeks or months. We wonder why Mark recorded Jesus’ ministry in the Gentile region more than other gospel writers. One possible reason is his audience. When Mark wrote his account, he was in Rome. His primary audience was non-Jewish believers. So, he wanted to let his audience know that Jesus’ ministry to Gentiles was God’s original plan.

In today’s passage, Jesus praised a Syrophoenician woman for her great faith by saying, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon had let your daughter.” (29) However, the initial encounter between Jesus and this woman was somewhat uncomfortable to read. It is different from his gracious encounter with a Samaritan woman in John’s account (Jn. 4:1-26). He was polite and respectful of the Samaritan woman, who had lived a sinful life. Yet Jesus was not polite or respectful of the lady who came to him by faith in today’s passage. He sounded rude toward her. Many questions arise. I was taken aback while preparing the message because of the language Jesus used. It seemed unclear what spiritual lesson we could learn from this passage. It’s easy to be sidetracked. But if we carefully consider the meaning of the exchanging words between Jesus and this woman, we can understand the main point of today’s event. Let’s think about why Jesus said what he said and why Jesus praised her for her reply (27-29).

Look at verse 24. “Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.” In several places in Mark’s account, we have seen Jesus trying to get away from the crowd for a time of rest and to instruct his disciples. This time, he left Galilee, particularly Capernaum, the headquarters of his Galilean ministry, and went outside the borders of Israel into the vicinity of Tyre (Map#1). The vicinity of Tyre is located northwest of Galilee along the Mediterranean coast, about 40 miles from Capernaum. Tyre was well known for its history of paganism and oppression of the people of Israel. It was the very place where Baal worship started. Queen Jezebel, who married Ahab, king of Israel, was the daughter of the king of the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Simon (1 Kings 17-21). She introduced Baal worship in Israel. She was a horrible and devastating influence on the Northern Kingdom of Israel. However, Tyre was a beautiful and great city, a metropolitan center, and a hub of commerce and industry along the Mediterranean coast (Pic#1,2). A huge stadium was bigger than the Stadium in Rome, where they performed chariot races (Pic#3). Jesus went to this vicinity to escape the demanding crowd and the hostile Jewish leaders so he could give more time to instruct his disciples.

Look at verse 24b. “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.” The city was crowded and bustling with people. Especially when Jesus and the twelve guys went around the city, they were too obvious to ignore. So, even though Jesus entered the house, his presence could not be hidden from the public. People recognized him and his disciples.

Look at verses 25 and 26. “In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.” The woman who heard about Jesus and sought to see him was a Gentile. She was Greek culturally and was Syrophoenician by birth. She could have been a wealthy, well-educated, and attractive woman living in the metropolitan city of Tyre. But she was desperate to see Jesus because an impure spirit possessed her daughter.

The phrase “an impure spirit” indicates that her daughter might have been living a sinful life. As a mother of a young unmarried daughter, her dream was to let her daughter grow into a beautiful woman who could marry a lovely young man, have several children, and live happily. But against her wishes, her daughter began to engage in shameful activities. As a mother, she did her best to prevent her from getting into the wrong crowd, but to no avail. She went wild and out of the norm. Could anyone in the city help her daughter from such terrible behaviors and demonic possession? No. She was a desperate and hurting mother. She became brokenhearted and helpless.

But one day, she heard that Jesus had come to the city. It seemed that she had already known Jesus. How could he know him? Well, Mark 3:8 gives us a clue. “When they heard about all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around **Tyre and Sidon.**” (3:8) The good news about Jesus had been spread all over, including the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon. She might have been among the large crowd attending Jesus’ crusade in Capernaum Galilee. During the crusade, hearing Jesus’ preaching, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news”, she repented and believed the good news. As she followed Jesus’ teaching, like the Sermon on the Mount, she continued to experience God’s kingdom in her life. Even though she was a Gentile woman, she had received the grace of God’s salvation through her faith in him.

However, she had a deep agony in her life. Her daughter, possibly her one and only loving daughter, was possessed by an impure spirit. Seeing her daughter tormented by an evil spirit day and night was unbearable. It was possible that she also heard about the daughter of Jairus, whom Jesus raised from death. (5:35-43) She thought, *“If Jesus could raise the dead, he could surely help my daughter.”*

Matthew’s account for this event is helpful. (15:21-28) According to Matthew’s account, when she first asked for Jesus’ mercy, she cried out, saying, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” (15:22) It shows that she believed that Jesus was the Messiah even before his disciples confessed him as the Messiah. Wow! Yet surprisingly, Jesus completely ignored her request. When she asked him again, “Lord, have mercy on me!”, still no answer from Jesus. Yet, she was persistent. His disciples thought that Jesus ignored her because she was a Gentile woman with whom the Jews, especially Jewish men, would not associate, considering her unclean. So, they came to Jesus and urged him to send her away because she was too annoying. (Mt. 15:23)

Why was Jesus so cold? Was he lacking in compassion and affection for this poor lady? Didn’t Jesus know that she was a woman of faith? I am sure he did. Then why did he act in such a rude way? Some people say that Jesus wanted to focus more on his disciples. Perhaps, he was mad at her because she interrupted his seclusion. It’s hard to figure it out.

When things don’t go along with our plans, we feel frustrated. But not so with Jesus. We see in Mark’s account that Jesus was constantly interrupted whenever he attempted to get away from the crowd. It’s also noteworthy that even when his initial plan was interrupted, he could manage circumstantial interruptions as a God-given opportunity to teach his disciples a vital spiritual lesson. That’s what Jesus did this time as well. Jesus utilized her intrusion as a golden opportunity to give his disciples a crucial spiritual lesson.

How did he do? Read verse 27. “‘First let the children eat all they want,’ he told her, ‘for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.’” We must carefully consider the meaning behind what he said to her. The phrase, ***“First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs,”*** is a simple parable. He was saying to her that if we have food on the table, we feed the children first. It’s not appropriate to take children’s bread and throw it to feed the dogs.

Here, the children refer to the Jews, God’s chosen people, and the dogs to the non-Jewish people. In fact, the ancient Jews liked to use the word *“dog”* toward Gentiles. It was often used mean-spiritedly toward non-Jewish people to provoke and despise them. It’s worse than the “N-word” or any other racial slurs. But I don’t believe that Jesus used the word “dogs” to insult the Gentile woman. He was using it for his disciples, who still had racial prejudice against non-Jewish people, including this woman.

But the primary point of the parable is NOT about racism but a priority. “***The children first and then the dogs.”*** In other words, all people of the world are created equal in the image of God. But when it comes to God’s plan of salvation for the whole world, the priority is Jews and then Gentiles. Apostle Paul also followed it when he said in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” It’s also evident in the Old Testament. For example, God spoke to the people of Israel through Moses in Exodus 19:5b-6, “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” God had a great plan of world salvation through Israel. But Israel was never intended to be the end of God’s salvation but the means to the end. Yet the Jews didn’t like God’s idea. They isolated themselves as only God’s chosen people and despised the non-Jewish people as cursed and unclean people.

Describing someone as a dog is very offensive, especially for a distressed lady. We would not expect to hear such words from the mouth of Jesus. But Jesus did call her “a dog” even though the word he used for a dog in Greek might not mean *“garbage-eating street dog” but “a cute pet dog.”* (Pic#4) But why did he do that? No matter how good intentions Jesus might have, it was too risky. Why did Jesus take the risk? Well, my best guess is that Jesus had confidence in her faith. Yet he wanted to test her so that she could demonstrate the quality of true faith in her. It’s like when God tested Abraham’s faith to sacrifice his one and only Son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. Abraham passed the test of faith, and God blessed his faith and established him as the ancestor of faith for all people of all nations. (Gen. 22:15-18) Indeed, Abraham’s act of obedience displayed the quality of true faith.

How did she respond to Jesus’ test? After hearing such offensive words, she could’ve reacted angrily by saying, *“How dare you?”* She could’ve hardened her heart and turned around and gone back home. If she was a woman who struggled with low esteem, she could fall into an identity crisis and curse herself, saying, “*Oh, no. Jesus hates me, and everyone hates me.”* No, she didn’t. Her response was excellent.

Look at verse 28. “‘Lord,’ she replied, ‘even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’” Surprisingly enough, she didn’t seem to be offended at all. Instead, she caught the primary point of the parable: the children should go first and then the dogs. Based on her quick and correct understanding, she was able to respond. She was a careful listener. If we paraphrase her answer, “*Yes, Lord, I am a dog because I am not a Jew but a Gentile. But isn’t it true that even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs? I would be happy and thankful to get even some leftover blessings.”*

No trace of offensiveness or self-defense is found in her response. Instead, she was humble, calm, and persistent in seeking God’s mercy, calling him “Lord.” She was confident in herself before God as a Gentile woman. Her response displayed that her faith wasn’t superficial. She had the essential quality of saving faith, just like Abraham. She was humble, persistent, pure, confident, and trusting. She was an emotionally, mentally, and spiritually healthy woman. Her response reminds us of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are those who are meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Mt. 5:3-6) Jesus was amazed to see the evidence of true faith in her reply and blessed her faith.

Look at verse 29. “Then he told her, ‘For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.’” Indeed, Jesus was not trying to ignore her. He was leading her to demonstrate the evidence of the quality of her faith. Jesus blessed her faith and promised that the demon had left her daughter. She took him at his words as she went back home. Look at verse 30. “She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.” Yes, the demon was gone, but she needed more healing of her inner wounds. Complete recovery takes a life-long process.

Let me close the sermon. Apostle Paul said that if we declare with our mouths, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved (Ro. 10:9). That’s the central point of the gospel. Yet just saying, *“I believe Jesus”* with our lips is not enough. We must practice our faith and develop the quality of our faith in our thoughts, actions, and relationships, which requires spiritual struggle and discipline.

How do we do that? Apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:20 and 21, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” He also said in Galatians 5:24, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Crucifying one’s sinful desire is painful, like having spiritual surgery. But the outcome of our spiritual struggle is eternal life and produces the essential quality of our faith. Paul said in Philippians 1:21, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Phil 1:21). It’s a paradoxical truth. When we practiced our faith in Christ by crucifying our sinful nature, we experienced life, God’s everlasting life, and his kingdom in him. That’s the Christian faith. We are so attached to many things in the world. But we should let go of everything, including our ego. We must hold on to Christ Jesus alone because he alone is forever. May the Lord help us to live by faith and gain the essential quality of eternal life.