

## **When the Gospel Goes to the Dogs**

**Mark 7:24-37**

**Second Baptist Church, Memphis**

**September 10, 2006**

**Dr. Brent Beasley**

New Testament professor and great preacher from Humboldt, Tennessee, Fred Craddock, tells of a missionary who was sent to preach the gospel in India near the end of World War II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home.

His denomination's mission sending agency wired him the money to book passage on a steamer, but when he got to the port city he discovered a boat load of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily.

These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world literally looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were now staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, *Merry Christmas*.

The people looked at him as if he were crazy and responded, *We're Jews*.

*I know that*, said the missionary, *What would you like for Christmas?*

In amazement these Jews responded, *Why, what we'd really like are pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany*.

So the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port.

Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States. As you might expect, his superiors wired back asking what happened to the money they had already sent. He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews.

His superiors wired back, *Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus*.

He wired back: *Yes, but I do*.

Here's someone who believed Jesus when he said in him there are no divisions between people. There's something about believing in Jesus that compels a person to pay no attention to the external barriers that divide people into separate groups. There's something about being a believing in Jesus that changes those culturally imposed boundaries.

Today we have a story about the day the Gospel of Jesus Christ went to the dogs.

Last week we looked at the first 23 verses of this chapter where the Pharisees complained to Jesus about the fact that his disciples were not washing their hands before eating.

Even today there is some social pressure about hand washing. Studies show that a person is three times more likely to wash his hands in a restaurant restroom if there is someone else in the restroom than if he is alone. I just made that up, but if *feels* true, doesn't it? There is an element of truthiness there.

The Pharisaic tradition of washing one's hands before eating was a long one. Since the Book of Exodus when the Law was given to the Israelites, it was required that the high priest, before he even entered the temple, ritually washed both his hands and his feet.

Over the years since that time, it had become the norm for all followers of the Pharisaic tradition, not just the priests, to wash their hands before eating, as a way of identifying with the high priest, and, more importantly, as a way of sanctifying the particular act of eating. It was really a form of our Baptist notion of the priesthood of all believers.

Jesus notices, however, that there has developed a tremendous gap between the Pharisees' external religious life and their internal life. The Pharisees have concentrated so much on these external measures of religious practice that the internal marks of faith are forgotten, or worse yet, deliberately avoided.

So Jesus calls them hypocrites and quotes to them Isaiah who said, *These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.*

Then Jesus calls the crowd over to make this next statement that he wants them all to hear: *Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.*

Jesus goes further here to say that it's not just that you're a hypocrite if how you act on the outside doesn't match up to your heart. He says that regardless of our hypocrisy, we are making a real mistake by focusing on the outward stuff, period. Unclean hands don't defile a person. It is what comes out from an unclean heart that defiles a person.

Jesus takes issue with those whose spiritual focus is on the surface, those who are focused on outward actions. He is perturbed by those who have reduced religion to doing the "right things," to looking good, to maintaining outward appearances. He is repulsed by their superficial, skin-deep faith. As one theologian says, *Externals are worse than useless, unless the heart is in the right place.*

It is deep below the surface of our lives, then, that God's work of grace takes place. The real action, Jesus is telling us religious people, is deep in the heart.

Jesus tells all of those gathered around him there: It's not what's on the outside that counts; it's what's on the inside that makes all the difference.

Jesus says this, and then what does he do? He puts this theory to the test by traveling a good 100 miles out of his way into the region of Tyre and Sidon— into the heart of pagan-land— to make the arduous journey from the theoretical to the practical—that arduous journey from the theoretical to the practical that we too often don't take.

Jesus has been preaching and teaching exclusively among his Jewish brethren, but now he goes into pagan territory and is confronted by a Syrophenician woman.

Here is someone who, at least judging from the outside of a person, is wrong in three important ways: One, she is a gentile, a foreigner. Two, she is woman, a nameless woman. Three, she's a woman who breaks the honor code of ancient Mediterranean society by daring to speak directly to an unknown, unrelated man. She is a pushy woman.

She has three strikes against her that should prevent her from even having this conversation with Jesus.

But she had a problem. Her daughter was demon-possessed. Perhaps she knew all-too-well about the walls that separated her from Jesus and that proper protocol forbade an unclean Gentile woman from speaking to a Jewish man, much less a famous religious teacher like Jesus. But her actions show that it was true then as it is now: when your children are involved, desperation overcomes even the strongest obstacles.

So this poor woman steels her courage and approaches Jesus with her problem. But the disciples wanted Jesus to send her away. It was all right for Jesus to heal Jews, but they did not want him to be bothered by other people, particularly this lowly Gentile woman.

But even though the social gap between them is cavernous, this woman gets in Jesus' face, begging him to heal her daughter. Jesus' response to her is troubling. He basically dismisses her as one of the dogs.

It's a disparaging metaphor, a derogatory term popular at the time for describing all gentiles. It means she has no business being in the company of a Jew, much less the Messiah.

*Let the children [of Israel] be fed first, he says, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*

On one level, it's the answer you'd expect. Evidently Jesus' long-range evangelistic plan is to go the Jews first and then later to the Greeks. So Jesus is not so much saying no to the woman as he is saying, *First things first; one thing at a time.*

Apparently, Jesus does not want to divert his mission. But does he have to use the derogatory language of the day and call the woman a dog?

We might rather just kind of skip over this part about Jesus calling someone a dog. I don't like it, I have to admit. The way Jesus talks to this woman doesn't fit our image of him.

I read a lot of articles on this passage this week. There are those who say that Jesus called this woman a dog with a twinkle in his eye, like he wasn't serious. There are those who say he was being sarcastic. There are those who say he was just testing her.

I don't know.

I do know that Jesus does something interesting with the word he uses. Jesus uses the diminutive form of the word "dogs".

In some languages, if you use a certain form of a word it becomes an affectionate term meaning little. Like in Spanish, for example this is accomplished by adding "ito" to the noun. For example, at Taco Bell you can get a large "taco" or a cute little "taquito". Jesus uses the diminutive form of the word

“dogs” here, which could be translated "little dogs," or perhaps "house dogs" or “pets.”

From “dog” to “house dog.” Dale Bruner, commenting on the parallel passage in Matthew, notes that in doing this Jesus puts *Jews and gentiles under the same roof*.

These terms represent a step toward including the gentiles. Now the gentiles are no longer outside in the streets; they are now in the house, at least.

And in a moment—thanks to this loving mother’s theological discernment—the dogs "will be at the table," the place of true fellowship.

In any case, the woman does not back down when Jesus makes his comments about not taking the children’s food and throwing it to the dogs. Dog indeed, she keeps right on nipping at Jesus’ heels, which showcases not only her debating skills, but her faith.

She dares to take his metaphor and turn it back on him. *Children get fed before the dogs? You’ve got that right, Lord! But even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs; even the pets get the scraps that fall from their master’s table!*

In those days, instead of napkins, sometimes the people at the table would wipe their greasy fingers on a piece of bread and throw it to floor for the dogs.

She is arguing that even on his own terms, there should be something from him—some scrap of grace—for someone like her who comes to him in faith. She is challenging him. *What*

*are you going to do, Lord: Judge me by externals only -- or judge me by my heart?*

And now we’re back to that journey Jesus made from the theoretical to the practical. He had just boldly told the scribes and the Pharisees and his disciples, *It’s not what’s on the outside that counts; it’s what’s on the inside—the heart— that makes all the difference*.

And now he goes beyond saying it with words; he says it now with his actions. He accepts this woman’s challenge. He has compassion on this one who, judging by the externals, is wrong in every way.

He says, *For what you’ve shown of your heart, the demon has left your daughter*. Whether this woman caused Jesus to change his mind or he intended to do this all along, I don’t know, but this gentile woman went home and found her child lying on the bed, well.

Where the traditions of the elders and the religious law could see only an outcast, Jesus sees the woman’s heart of faith, and he heals her child (a long-distance, third-party healing no less).

Furthermore, from this point on Jesus does not hold his saving power in reserve, but expands the circle of God’s mercy to include those once considered outsiders. According to Bruner, he "opens himself to the whole world in mission" now. He welcomes all who put their faith in him.

*[Thanks to Heidi Husted for this point in The Christian Century, August 16-23, 2000, p. 829]*

And that was the day that the gospel of Jesus Christ went to the dogs.

Because it's not what's on the outside that counts; it's what's on the inside that makes all the difference.

Years ago in our city, at a time when racial prejudice was codified, was more overt than it is now with signs that directed black people to certain water fountains and certain restrooms and certain schools and certain bathrooms, there was a little black boy who was watching the balloon man at the fair.

The man was evidently a good balloon salesman, because he allowed a red balloon to break loose and soar high up in the air, thereby attracting a crowd of prospective customers. Next he released a blue balloon, then a yellow one, and a white one. They all went soaring up into the sky until they disappeared.

The little black boy stood looking at the black balloon for a long time; then he asked, *Sir, if you sent the black one up, would it go as high as the others?*

The balloon man gave the kid a smile. He cut the string that held the black balloon in place and, as it soared upwards, said, *It isn't the color, son. It's what's inside that makes it rise.*

It's what's inside. Jesus has been trying to tell us this for 2,000 years.

It's not clean hands or dirty hands. It's not gentile or Jew. It's not male or female. It's not Baptist or Catholic. It's not fundamentalist or moderate, conservative or liberal. It's not black or white.

It's what's inside. It is deep below the surface of our lives that God's work of grace takes place.

*Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out from the inside are what defile.*

It's what's inside.