

## “Has Not God Chosen the Poor in the World...?”

James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

September 5, 2021

“Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.” That is how the woman “in the region of Tyre” is described, the woman who begged Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. A *Gentile*, of *Syrophenician* origin, in the region of *Tyre*. Those details matter. A lot.

Let’s back up. Jesus has spent much of his ministry in and around Galilee. Jewish territory. Jesus himself was a Jew, as were his twelve disciples, and many of his followers. Jesus’ primary opponents were also Jews: the scribes, the Pharisees, the teachers of the Jewish Law. In the previous chapter in Mark’s gospel, Jesus had been in his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee, and in various towns and villages along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. But now Jesus decides to take a little trip. More than a *little* trip; he heads northwest, to the “region of Tyre.” As the crow flies, that’s a distance of some thirty miles; for anyone traveling by land, it would have been more like forty miles. Forty miles – into enemy territory. Today, Tyre is the fourth-largest city in the country of Lebanon; in the time of Jesus, it was one of the largest cities along the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. It was a Greek city with a long and rich history; it had been inhabited since the third millennium before Christ. According to Greek legend it was the birthplace of the princess Europa, who was abducted by the Greek god Zeus. According to Greek and Roman legends it was the birthplace of Dido, the founder of Carthage and the lover of the Trojan hero Aeneas. By the time of Jesus there was bitter enmity between the people of Tyre and the Jewish people. In part that was because the much of the food harvested by many poor Jewish farmers was bought by the wealthy people in Tyre, while the Jews themselves went hungry. That economic exploitation added to constant religious and political tensions between Jews and Greeks.

It seems an odd choice for Jew to choose as a vacation destination. But that is essentially what Jesus does: he heads to a place where he hopes no one will follow him. Mark tells us he “did not want anyone to know he was there.” It seems even the twelve disciples did not follow him, because they are not mentioned at all in this little story. It is just Jesus: Jesus the Jew, heading into Greek territory, alone.

I’m inclined to think that Jesus wanted to do more than just “get away from it all.” I’m inclined to think there was a *purpose* to this journey, a specific *goal* or *mission* that he had in mind.

Jesus’ reputation has preceded him. At least one of the people around Tyre has heard of this wonder-worker. She recognizes him for who he is. A Greek-speaking woman, a “Syrophenician,” that means that she was a Syrian of Phoenician origin. There was nothing Jewish about her. Nothing at all.

But she shared something in common with many Jews. She had a need, a very human need. Her daughter was not well. She had been possessed by a demon. An unclean spirit. This was not a *physical* ailment, *per se*, nor even a *mental* ailment, although it might have manifested itself in both

physical and mental ways. This was a *spiritual* ailment, in need of a *spiritual* solution. The woman knew no one who could do anything to help her daughter. But she knew about Jesus, and what *he* could do. So when she hears that Jesus is in her region, she hastens to the house where he is staying. Either Jesus was doing a poor job of being discreet ... or perhaps he *wanted* this encounter to happen.

She begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus' reply sounds uncharacteristically harsh: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This would have been a common attitude among the Jews. They looked down disdainfully upon the Greeks, and the Jews of Galilee looked especially disdainfully upon the people of Tyre. To them, they were nothing but "dogs." We're not talking about loving, domesticated dogs – we're talking about wild, scavenging dogs. The kind you don't really want around. These "dogs" stand in contrast to the "children," that is, the Jews, the people who believed they had been specially chosen and destined by God for salvation. It's a fairly typical view held by *anybody* who believes that their nation, their people, is inherently *better* than any other, or who thinks that *their* country, *their* people, comes *first* in God's eyes. It's like nativism, it's like racism, it's like white supremacy – although first-century Jews were hardly "white."

I do not believe that Jesus actually held any of those views. He could not have been the Savior of the World if he had. He was spouting a typical first-century Jewish view ... to test the woman's faith.

She's just been called a "dog." She's just been told she and her daughter are not worthy. She's just been told that Jesus *will not* heal her daughter. So ... she argues with him. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." That word "Sir" could also be translated "Lord." The Greek word she uses is *Kyrie*. You know, like *Kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy." She recognizes Jesus's authority. She does what many of the Jewish leaders Jesus has encountered have failed to do. *She calls him Lord.*

Jesus relents. He probably also relaxes, and rejoices. The woman has passed his test. She has *faith* – faith that the Jewish leaders so completely *lack*. The people who should have faith, don't; this woman, who shouldn't be expected to have faith, does. This is so important, so critical. It is not *nationality* that matters. It is not *ethnicity*. It is not whether one is *rich* or *poor*, *great* or *small* in the eyes of common people; nor is it the status or heritage of any particular family; nor even how much religious training one has received. *None* of those distinctions matters. What matters to Jesus is *faith*.

And so he grants her request. This is the only story in the entire Gospels in which it appears that Jesus *loses* an argument. Although, as I said, I don't really believe that Jesus held the views that he was espousing. I think, rather, that this story is here for all of *us*, who so frequently look at the world and at the people in it through *human* lenses, rather than the eyes of *God*. There was indeed a *purpose* to Jesus' mission to the region of Tyre. It was to teach *us* a lesson, by the *faith* of this non-Jewish woman.

So the woman's daughter is freed of her demon. Jesus doesn't even have to visit her in person. It just *happens*, instantaneously, when the Syrophenician woman expresses her faith and trust in Jesus.

Then Jesus leaves – mission accomplished! – and heads back home. Sort of. He travels through Sidon – another large Greek metropolis along the Mediterranean Sea – and then heads for the Decapolis. That was a region east of the Sea of Galilee, where there were ten small Greek cities. He is recognized there too; some people bring him a deaf man with a speech impediment. Jesus heals him too. Clearly, Jesus wasn't done ministering to the Greeks – and clearly, the Greeks weren't done recognizing his authority for what it was. If only the Jewish religious leaders could have done the same.

James picks up on some of these themes in his epistle. I said last week that he wrote this epistle to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” – that is, to Christians from a Jewish background. To people who had been *naturally conditioned* by their traditional religious teachings to think that Jews were better than everyone else, more special in the eyes of God. James accuses them of showing partiality, of playing favorites. “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus?” As far as James was concerned, this wasn’t just a rhetorical question. There were offenses being committed in their Christian churches that were not worthy of the name of Christ. He is calling them out. The particular issue that most concerns James is the way the poor Christians were being treated, compared to the rich. He says, “If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?” There was a seating arrangement at church, a pecking order, based on one’s apparent wealth. James is saying that that seating arrangement, that pecking order, *wasn’t Christian*.

James reminds them of the values of Jesus. “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” God came in human form to the earth, not to the rich and powerful, not to the wealthy Romans in their pillared homes, but to a peasant Jewish family in a far corner of the world, to a people who were being oppressed and exploited. The message that this Word-made-flesh proclaimed was, to a very large extent, a message to the poor and powerless. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God ... blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled ... blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh...” Remember those words? Luke’s version of the Beatitudes. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation ... woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry ... who to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” Jesus turns the tables on the status quo. Partiality – looking upon some people with special favor, at the expense of others – has *no place* in the kingdom of God. Not in heaven, for God will not allow it there; nor on earth, for it is not worthy of Jesus. James reminds his readers of the most basic, the most fundamental, the most important ethical commandment in the entire Bible: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If you find yourself looking down on *anybody* less fortunate, treating them differently for *any* reason – because of their lack of wealth, their lack of education, their country of origin, the color of their skin – then you stand in flagrant violation of one of the highest values of Jesus Christ. The Christians James was addressing were doing just that – and he calls them out. “If you show partiality, you commit sin.” Period! “Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy.” Period! “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.” Speak and act as those who are to be judged by *God Almighty*.

Maybe we should all go find some Syrophenician women, metaphorically speaking. Some people who don’t look like us, who don’t speak our language, who haven’t come from the same stock we have come from. Or maybe we should all go find some people who are poor – really, truly poor. Or anybody who is not part of the “dominant” portion of American society. The people who get looked down upon, for one reason or another. The people who sometimes get treated like *dogs*. Maybe we should all go find some of these people ... and show them the radical, truly *radical*, love of Jesus Christ.

Jesus had a mission to do in the region around Tyre. Where is the mission that *we* need to do?

© 2021 Rev. Bill Pinches