

Mark 7:24—30

July 8, 2018

One of the most famous lectures C.S. Lewis delivered was during WWII, entitled 'The Inner Ring.' It was delivered in London at King's College in 1944. It's worth a read and you can find it with a simple google search.

By "Inner Ring" Lewis means what we would call the 'In crowd.' Everyone wants to be in that crowd and not on the outside looking in. Lewis says in part,

But you have met the phenomenon of an Inner Ring. You discovered one in your house at school before the end of the first term. And when you had climbed up to somewhere near it by the end of your second year, perhaps you discovered that within the ring there was a Ring yet more inner, which in its turn was the fringe of the great school Ring to which the house Rings were only satellites. It is even possible that the school ring was almost in touch with a Masters' Ring. You were beginning, in fact, to pierce through the skins of an onion. And here, too, at your University—shall I be wrong in assuming that at this very moment, invisible to me, there are several rings— independent systems or concentric rings—present in this room? And I can assure you that in whatever hospital, inn of court, diocese, school, business, or college you arrive after going down, you will find the Rings—what Tolstoy calls the second or unwritten systems.

All this is rather obvious. I wonder whether you will say the same of my next step, which is this. I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at

all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside.

That terror at being left outside stays with you longer than high school—it is a phenomena we all know (here's a tip—those you think are on the inside really don't know much more than you.)

People from Jr. high to the nursing home are forever including some and excluding others. And there remains—often a terror of being left outside.

Now we've seen Jesus turns this man-made economy upside down. Jesus was the decisive insider—from glory, God the son, equal with God—who became an outsider.

He became an outsider to make outsiders not just his friends but his family.

Jesus the insider became an outsider to make outsiders family.

We've seen him to be much more than just a good man. Week by week he gives helps us trust in him more and more. Again and again. Outsiders are drawn to him from all over. Today is no different.

We've seen him in an array of different situations—he's healed the sick, fed the hungry, raised the dead, walked on water, confronted hypocrites and in all those situations he is singularly unique.

Today he meets an outsider—

“And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. ²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician 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.” ²⁸ But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” 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.”
Mark 7:24—30

PRAY

So Jesus needs a bit of a break. He has been harassed by grasping crowds everywhere he went. He need some time away.

So he goes to the region known as Tyre & Sidon—this is a coastal area. It is kind of like how so many of us spend some time in California during the hot summer. Jesus goes to secretly into the region but his presence could not be kept under wraps.

He is found out and Mark draws our attention to a nameless woman with great need.

“But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down

at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth.”

Mark wants us to focus not so much on this woman’s little girl but on the woman herself. What does he tell us?

She came and fell at his feet.

This is not normal behavior. She barged into a house uninvited, interrupted whatever Jesus was doing to throw herself down and repeatedly beg for her daughter. This woman is despairing. She was willing to run through any barrier for her little girl.

Decorum meant little to this lady.

What do we know about her?

4 Things—

1. She is a woman—you might say, “Duh.” But in that day women were viewed as property. All women were seen to be socially below all men. Incidentally, women personhood and rights were pioneered by those with a good understanding of the image of God and influenced with a Christian worldview. Rabbis couldn’t be approached by women.
2. She is a Gentile—that merely means non-Jew. But to the Jew she was contaminated and unclean. She was human debris.

It gets worse.

3. She is a pagan—she was Syrophenician which means that she lived in a society that worshiped idols by the dozen. She had many nasty pagan rituals that made her beyond reach in the Jewish eyes.
4. She is Syrian—in that day she lived in a place that was as one writer put it, “Israel’s bitterest enemies.”

And yet she is the one who comes to Jesus. In all of our journeys with Jesus through Mark this Syrophenician woman is the least likely person to interact with Jesus the Jew.

In that day and at that time—to the Jewish mind—
Woman + Gentile + Pagan + Syrian = Dog.

If this lady was to approach any reputable Rabbi in the streets—he would cover his eyes and refuse to speak with her. Why?

She is a Dog.

To the Jews, dogs were dirty, nasty scavengers. Don’t think of little sprinkles at home. Most dogs at this time wandered the streets in menacing packs and carrying scores of loathsome diseases. Stray dogs had rabies, were apt to attack people and ate out of the trash heap.

When a dog like that would come close—people would beat them away if they had to.

In the eyes of the Jews this woman was no better than a dog. She was the lowest of the low a Gentile dog. She

was unclean, unworthy, undeserving. She was a Gentile dog—and a female one at that.

It is a common sad human experience for one race of people to look down on another. One of the ways that this is most evident is in nicknames different peoples have for each other.

For example, the Quechua people of Ecuador called a neighboring Indian tribe, Auca. Auca means savage. They are the savages. The Auca's would later call themselves the Huaorani (humans).

Chances are most in here have looked down on others because of the color of their skin or the place of their birth.

Racism is not a new phenomenon.

The Jews called non-Jews, dogs.

And this Syrophenician woman was to the Jew—a quintessential dog. Spiritually speaking she was dirty, scavenging about worshiping idols menacing faithful Jews.

In fact, if she were to address a Jewish Rabbi, he would cover his eyes and refuse even to talk to her. She was a dog.

All of these things add up to make her the most unlikely person to approach Jesus in the whole gospel of Mark. She knew that Rabbis would cover their eyes and not listen. But she is desperate.

She comes to Jesus falls at his feet and begs for the welfare of her little girl. HELP! My baby is tormented and I have nowhere else to go. HELP!

With her face to the ground and her hands gripping at his feet gentle Jesus meek and mild says,

Vs. 27,

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Huh. What in the world?

Jesus seems to be calling her a dog. Do you know why? Because he IS calling her a dog.

To say this is a strange interchange is not nearly enough. This seems not just rude but vulgar and repugnant. How are we to understand this?

Let’s keep this in mind—Mark continually shows Jesus doing or saying unexpected things to get the reader’s attention. When Jesus does or says something to strange we are invited to look closer.

More is going on.

Remember?

- He is asleep in the hold of a boat as a storm rages.
- He says a little girl who is dead is just sleeping.
- He takes five loaves and two fishes.
- He walks on the water meaning to pass by.

Each time without fail Jesus does the unexpected or the strange to get our attention and say something about himself.

What does he do in our passage that is strange?

You saw it. He calls a desperate woman a dog.

Jesus knows what he is doing and here we have a bit of irony. This woman knew that the Jewish establishment would have regarded her as no better than a mangy, scavenging dog.

Jesus knows this when he says,

Vs. 27,

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the (puppy) dogs.”

Jesus uses the diminutive for dog calling her what is equivalent to a little dog or a puppy dog. He is not calling her a scavenging mongrel. That is good but it is still strange.

So many people are embarrassed for Jesus in this passage and they will bend over backwards to tell everyone that what he says here is not really that bad. He calls her a puppy dog.

But still.

He is calling her a dog. He is saying, I am here to feed the children (the Jews) the word of God and not the little dogs (Gentiles).

He is not saying, “You aren’t a stray mutt, you are cuter than that.” He is doing something different.

He is telling this woman a parable—a story—where she is a participant. Even more surprising she understands her part. This is made clear in her response,

28 But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

What are we to make of her response?

She understands the parable Jesus is telling.

So far, no one in this book has been able to understand any parable—the disciples least of all. And yet this woman from the outside understands exactly what Jesus is saying to her.

It was a parable she did not need to have explained to her—she understood.

She knew that Jesus had come as the Promised One of God, the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. She knew that he had come as a Jew in fulfillment of all of what the OT said about him.

We know this because she knows she is not one of the children.

Who then are the children?

The nation of Israel. Jesus had come to for the Jew first then the Gentile.

He is saying, I have come to feed the children of Israel the good news from God—to nourish them with the bread of eternal life—not the Gentiles.

I have come from them.

And she says—if a crumb or two comes in my direction it won't make any of the children go hungry. In other words you have plenty to go around—you can help my daughter and not take anything away from the children of Israel.

She stands as the first person in the book of Mark to understand one of the parables of Jesus. The most unlikely hearers are often the most receptive. They have no preconceived notions about what Jesus should do, or say or be like.

Those on the outside just believe he can help. This woman, this Gentile dog believes that Jesus can help.

And Jesus says,

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.”

- He is NOT saying because you said all the right things to me, I will help you.

- He is NOT saying because you understood my parable, I will help you.
- He is NOT saying because you did not get offended when I called you a puppy dog, I will help you.

He is saying,

You believe in me, I will help you.

She went away and found that her daughter was freed from the torture of a demon. We shouldn't get all caught up in what Jesus says to this woman. What he does for this woman is far more important.

He might have compared her to a dog but he treats her like a daughter.

- He welcomed her.
- He listened to her.
- He spoke to her.
- He healed her daughter.

Did he treat her like a dog?

No. How did he treat her?

Jesus might have compared this woman to a dog but he treated her like a daughter. She came to him begging like a little dog might, but she went away a daughter.

Jesus makes outsiders family.

She came to him with a great need—

Her daughter had a demon. But instead of just getting rid of the demon, this woman meets Jesus. He shows her by his actions that he has come to find the outsiders.

She was not a Jew. She knew she was on the outside of things. She also knew that she could not help herself.

She came thinking that her biggest need was that her daughter might have a respite—but this interchange shows that her need was she was an outsider to God.

When Jesus compared her to a dog he was not saying that she was unclean in all the ways that the Jews thought she was. It only makes sense.

Why would he go to great pains to explain there is no such thing as unclean food to the Pharisees only to reject a person as unclean?

He wouldn't.

She might have been a Gentile. Jesus might have compared her to a dog.

But how did he treat her?

Like a dog? No.

Like a daughter. Do you see what is going on here? Jesus is saying by his actions here that any who are willing to come to me and ask for help whether they are Jewish or not, I will help, I will save.

In other words anyone can come to Jesus and ask for his help. Mark shows us the most unlikely disciple here

with the Syrophenician woman. If she can come—any can come to him.

She knew who she was—but who she was did not matter nearly as much as who he is.

Our thinking about Jesus needs to start with him and not ourselves. We make a grave mistake if we reverse that order.

What do I mean?

This woman knew who she was and all the ways that she fell short but she did not let that keep her from Jesus. She came anyway reckoning that he was the only one who could really help her.

Jesus takes outsiders and makes them family.
Jesus takes dogs and makes them children.

How?

Let's be real. It was horrendous that this woman was rejected and cast to the borders of polite society. That is wrong for people to do that.

But let's be real.

She still in great need of help.

She was not a dog—she was something else much worse—she was a sinner.

Do you see he doesn't just say—you aren't a dog—you are better than that. You aren't inherently unclean and that bad.

Don't let anyone call you a dog anymore. No, he calls her a (puppy) dog but treats her like a daughter. She came begging like a little dog and he sent her away blessed like family.

This is a picture of what Jesus does for all who come to him. Often we are plagued with a trouble of this or that sort, something that vexes us to such a degree that we need help.

We go to Jesus asking for help with our problem and he does something much more fundamental. He makes outsiders family.

The book of Mark continues. As we continue to follow Jesus we will witness his crucifixion.

It was here that he was thoroughly rejected.

- The Pharisees he confronted would have him arrested and reject him.
- The Romans he confounded would have hang him on a cross and reject him.
- The disciples he comforted would run from him and reject him.

Most emphatically—God the father would reject Jesus. To put it in terms of this passage, Jesus would be treated as worse than a dog so that any who believe could be made children of God.

The son of God was treated worse than a dog so that outsiders might be welcomed as children of God.

Jesus did not come to reward the faithful insiders but to find the faithless outsiders. He came to become an outsider to make all who come to him family.

Jesus makes the outsiders more than just insiders but he makes them family.

Two questions as we conclude our time this morning.

Is your sense of unworthiness keeping you from him?

Our thinking about Jesus needs to start with him and not ourselves. We make a grave mistake if we reverse that order.

What do I mean?

This woman knew who she was and all the ways that she fell short but she did not let that keep her from Jesus. She came anyway reckoning that he was the only one who could really help her.

Do you see—she focused on him and not herself.

When we focus on ourselves we ask questions like—

- Why would Jesus be interested in me?
- I can't be worth much to Jesus.
- I'm sure he wouldn't want me anyway.
- I'm just a worthless dog.

Whenever you focus on yourself you will have myriads of reasons that you fall short.

Why?

Because here is the reality. You do. You fall short in many and significant ways. And if you focus on all the ways you are unworthy and say—he would never want me—you keep yourself from Jesus.

Our friend today came to Jesus knowing of her unworthiness and she let Jesus sort out the rest.

Jesus knows your sin and welcomes you anyway. That is what makes Christianity so radically different.

He knows who you are and still loves you.

Tim Keller says it this way—

“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.” Tim Keller

Is a sense of unworthiness toward others keeping you from them?

Is there anyone you won't associate with? If there is you don't understand what it means to follow Jesus. You need to ask yourself if you really love Jesus if there are people you think are beneath you.

You might not say it aloud but is there a person or a class of people that you consider little better than dogs?

As Christians—this cannot be. If Jesus welcomes even the most remote outsider—we MUST too.

Do you?

Is there a person or class of persons that you won't relate to?

- Uneducated?
- Educated?
- Democrats?
- Republicans?
- LGBT+?

