

An Unusual Conversation

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 7:24-30

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John Song

Well, good morning. It's a pleasure to be here with you all. My name is John Song. I am the Director of Youth Ministries here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. It's great to be with you. I'm filling in for Pastor Randy here on the Sunday morning. Just as a quick aside, some of you have asked me now that I am licensed to preach, whether or not I should be called 'pastor.' And while licensure does give me the benefit to speak on a regular basis, not just to this congregation but also to other O.P.C. churches in the area, I'm not ordained yet. So there's still much left for me before I can be called the title 'Pastor.' So I thank all of you for your patience, and those who have tried to properly keep the titles right by calling me 'Director Song,' which always sounds a little weird. It sounds like I'm like a military dictator or something. It just doesn't...it just doesn't sound right. So just call me 'John' for the time being. That should be just fine.

Along those lines, I just want to thank all of you who have been praying for me throughout this ordination process. I know some of you have been asking when is this finally going to be over with. And, you know, the process started in January. It's gone on for about six months, and I've got about three months left. So, Lord willing—and it's about a nine month process. So to borrow language from one of my favorite preachers, Philip Reichen, I guess you could say I'm in a state of 'ordination gestation.' I've reached the end of my second trimester with pastor. So I've got about three more exams, a couple more committee meetings, and another floor exam before I'm through. So I covet all of your prayers and encouragement in the months ahead.

If you could take out your Bibles and please go ahead and turn or tap to Mark Chapter 7. We continue on in our series in the book of Mark, through the Gospel of Mark, and this passage is really a culmination of everything that we've been learning since September of last year. We've been talking about what is the gospel, and we've talked about the narrative of covenant—how the covenant story weaves its way in the fulfillment of that through Jesus Christ. And this passage in particular talks about Christ and the coming kingdom. And there are some important firsts that happen in this passage, and what does it mean to belong to the kingdom of God. So, Mark 7:24-30.

²⁴ 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Shall we pray together. Father, as we examine this most unusual conversation, may it lead us to the glories of Christ in the kingdom of God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This passage is a beautiful one. I'm very excited to preach today, because it's often overlooked. It's a story with so much to unpack, and it's a very unusual conversation. And it's a story that you've probably read growing up, and you just sort of kind of glanced over it, thinking to yourself, there's a lot of questions here, but I don't really know what's going on, you I'm just going to move on. And you're sort of wondering what is this conversation, what's happening here.

I mean, this is not just fairly common for little Bible stories like this, but this is also fairly common in our upbringings, when we grew up as kids. I mean, growing up as children we often hear stories that we don't quite understand until much later, until we've been able to parse out some of the meanings. In my cultural background, growing up as a Korean American, I would often hear tales in the Korean folk tradition, where fables would often be instructions on how to honor and respect your parents. And there was a story that was often told as a young child, whose point I just completely missed every time my mom would tell it to me. These stories would often be in tradition very guilt-laden and almost comically tragic in nature. And just to give you a little taste, here's one of those stories. This is a story that my mom would frequently tell me.

Long ago there lived a green frog with his widowed mother in a small pond. The green frog would never listen to his mother. When she told him to do something he always did the opposite. (You can imagine why my mom told me this story growing up.) If his mother told him to play in the hills, he went to the river. If she told him to go up, he went down. And if she told him left, he went right, and so forth. The mother frog worried about what she would do with her son. He caused her so much distress and embarrassment. Why can't he be like the other frogs? she said to herself. Why can't he respect his elders and do what he's told? (I totally missed the point.) Eventually the mother frog was growing old, and she worried so much that eventually she became sick. But even then the green frog did not change his ways. Finally, when the mother frog knew that she was about to pass, she called her son to her side. She wanted a proper burial on the mountain. And since she knew that the green frog would do the opposite of what she told him, she chose her words carefully. "I don't have much longer to live," she said. "When I die, do not bury me on the mountain side. You must bury me on the bank of the river." Four days later the mother frog passed. The green frog was terribly sad. He blamed himself for her death, and he was sorry for all the heartache he had caused her. He resolved finally to listen to his mother's instruction. I always did the opposite of what she told me when she was alive, he said to himself, but now I will do exactly as she told me. So even knowing that it was unwise, the green frog buried his mother by the river. When the monsoon rains came that summer, the river rose higher and higher. It flowed over its banks and washed his mother's grave away. The green frog sat in the pouring rain by the river bank, crying and crying for his mother. And that is why to this day the green frog cries when it rains.

As sort of laughably heavy-handed and almost emotionally manipulative this fable is, when I heard the story growing up I thought to myself, well, you know that's a sad story with a sad

ending, but you know, what gives? Or I don't get this; this makes no sense to me, you know. I didn't know that my mom was in no clear terms saying you are being disrespectful, disobedient. Shape up. I didn't get it. And so the words were just left there. It just was passing away.

This is what can happen sometimes when we approach stories like this in Scripture, when we read about this Syrophenician woman. And I have to admit, at first glance, when we see this passage, it sounds very unusual and difficult. Why would a discussion about a meal time between children and pets lead to a faith that Jesus commend, and now just brings about this miraculous healing? Why does Jesus here... It seems like he's referring to the Gentiles here as dogs. What does that mean? This seems like a very strange and odd and illogical way for Jesus to operate.

But you know, as we've been learning in his feeding of the five thousand and his dealings with the disciples and his response to the crowds, that Jesus doesn't just speak in riddles and mystery just to trick others or intentionally mislead them, but rather he's telling people about what the Kingdom of God is and what is the gospel message. And if you remember from last week's passage, we heard from Pastor Randy about the way in which Jesus declared all foods to be clean. It isn't what is on the outside that defiles a person, but rather what's in his heart, what's on the inside. Our sin is what defiles us and its consequences. And Jesus is coming to say—in the passage that we heard last week—that he has come to fulfill the Law of God through his life, death, and resurrection. And now we see in verses 24-30, in this passage that we're looking at today, we're seeing that what he's verbally saying and teaching, he's applying it in practice with the Syrophenician woman.

So let's back up and let's set the scene here a little bit. Jesus, right now at this point in the narrative, he is both mentally and physically in need of retreat. I mean, how many of you can relate to that here today. Herod is trying to kill him. The Pharisees and the Sadducees are plotting to kill him. His own family doesn't understand him. His disciples are driving him up the wall. On top of that, his name is getting very famous in Capernaum, the Jewish lands. And everyone that does like Jesus, always just wants something from him. They're clamoring for his attention. He's being surrounded from every side, stretched and pulled from every direction, in every way. Maybe much like many of us here today.

So what does Jesus do? He retreats. He goes to a Gentile land. Specifically in the passage we see here in verse 24, the land of Tyre and Sidon. It's roughly about fifty miles away from Capernaum. It's a seaport town. Jesus heads to the beach for rest and wishes for himself not to be known. You see very clearly in verse 24, he doesn't want anyone to know that he's there. Now, why do people find him? This isn't a situation where Jesus is somehow powerless to stop people from hearing about him. Rather, this is where we see the humanity of Jesus on display. He's tired. He wants his introvert time. He wishes for a period of rest, to get away from all that surrounds him and take some time off. And he leaves his main focal point of ministry in Israel and enters a place of rest.

This just as an aside. This is why rhythms of Sabbath are so important for us, both individually and as a body of Christ. This is why many refer to Sunday as a Sabbath, a day where we rest away from the pressures and the trials and discouragements, from our jobs, career, from the pressures of the world, and enter into this place of worship, of restoration. And like it or not,

for every single person here, Sabbath is going to come at you, whether you want it to or not-- whether you will find time for a Sabbath or your body will just shut down and find it for you. So if Jesus in his perfect humanity needs rest, that's instructive for us. So do we.

But you know, it's more than just beachside views and port town harbors that Jesus is looking for. It's his rest is also a fulfillment of so much of what Jesus's kingdom promises. The fulfillment of the expanding kingdom of God, that we've been discussing in our theme of covenant and the covenant kingdom in the Old Testament. You see, there's something very significant about the city of Tyre. Tyre was a city located...which is right now in where we would say modern day Lebanon is. It was conquered by Joshua in the Old Testament. And it was supposed to be a land that was a part of the nation of Israel. In fact, if you read Joshua 19, Tyre is supposed to be a part of the Israelite land. But Joshua and Israel was never able truly to subdue that land, and it became a Gentile nation. This is a region that would later on forge alliances with Israel and trade in weaponry, but it would also bring about religious worship of other gods. Tyre would later fall into idol worship, where it housed Jezebel in Elijah's day, and it brought about the idol Baal, right. And more importantly, in the space between the Old Testament and the New, in that history, Tyre would later fight wars against the Jews. And it was called by Jewish historians of the day their bitter enemies. So this is not friendly territory, or so we think.

This is actually a part of the Kingdom of God that Jesus is reclaiming for himself. If you look at Psalm 87:4 you'll notice that Tyre is promised the blessings of the Messianic kingdom. You know that famous song, "All my fountains are in you," from Psalm 87, Tyre is mentioned as one of the cities of blessing. So where Joshua had failed to gain conquest of the Kingdom of God with the sword, Jesus comes into Tyre and conquers it by his word. Jesus was entering into a land of his inheritance and saying to this people of God, that you were once not my people, but now you are my people. Alright? Very intriguing here. So that's a little bit of the background story.

And here he enters into this conversation with this Gentile woman from Tyre. And in this conversation, like so many of Jesus' prior ones, it's not what we would imagine a conversation between an Israelite rabbi and a Gentile to be like. There's some unusual components to this conversation. The first is this sort of **Unworthy Request**. Who is this woman that comes before for Jesus. Well, she is not what you would expect. She was—as it refers to in the story as it is retold in Matthew 15—she was a Canaanite, a Syrophenician, which means that she bore the ancestry and division that being a citizen of Tyre would entail. A bitter enemy of the Israelites. She was one that probably was a part of or participated in some of the worship of Baal. And it was a religion that specifically highlighted fertility and the health of children as a sign that Baal was faithful. Her lineage meant also that she was the equivalent of a religious enemy, almost sort of like a religious terrorist, someone that should not be associated with.

Now furthermore, commentators suggest that she was most likely a widow. There's no mention of a husband in this passage. And most scholars suggest that Matthew and Mark highlight this, the fact that she doesn't have a spouse, to further sort of just put some more nails in the coffin. Because back then being a widow meant a level of destitution, due to the secular and religiously legalistic hierarchy. And not only that, she had a demon-possessed daughter. That was a sort of a scarlet letter of sorts that demonstrated that 'god' or Baal must've been

punishing her for something that she must have done. In addition to that, Matthew 15, as it tells the story, is that she wasn't exactly the kindest of individuals as she's making this request. Mark tells us here that she's begging. And we might think that this is some sort of a sympathetic. . . a begging that is. . . maybe we take pity on, but this is more than just that. The language suggests that this was disrespectful, that this was sort of a persistently annoying request. Alright?

Every single part of this narrative in Mark says that this woman is unworthy to receive anything from Jesus. Her birth, her lineage, her religion, where she grew up from, her status and lot in life, her family situation. Everything would seem to appear that she is unworthy to receive anything from Christ. Think about the outrageous boldness of this request.

To think about an equivalent today. . . We can think about examples of disrespect, but let's just consider even like the tamest of turf wars, like retail, OK. Imagine me walking into an Apple store with fifteen Microsoft laptops. Walking straight up to the Genius Bar, ignoring that queue, right, and dropping all those laptops in the middle of the Genius Bar and saying I need you to fix this, right now. This is the superior product. Imagine that level of disrespect. I have a friend who works nearby at the Under Armor headquarters in Baltimore, and he was telling me a story about how if you come into work even just wearing a Nike swoosh anywhere on you, right—your shirt, your pants, your shoes—that will get you blacklisted just like that.

Now if we do this, if we consider levels of respect and decorum even in our clothes, in our technology, and we think of sort of proper ways of handling things, how much more does this make this woman's request worse. This is religious, this is social, this is political. And here she is, from all outside appearance she is coming disgracefully, rudely. Can you imagine what people are thinking about her at this moment. Can you imagine what they're saying. You? Why are you coming to Jesus? How unbelievably rude. Lady, I have a story about green frogs that you need to hear.

So after hearing this unworthy request, I want you to put yourself now in Jesus's shoes. How would you personally react to this woman? You're tired. You just want to be alone with your disciples so that you can teach them, which he will eventually be able to do later on in the narrative. You're looking for rest in a land that you think no one's going to know you, only to discover that someone like this woman comes up to you begging. How do you respond?

Jesus, being the almighty, wonderful, merciful Savior that he is, gives a most **Peculiar Response** to the Syrophenician woman. It's one that at the surface doesn't appear to make much sense at all, but it's so important to Jesus's understanding of the Kingdom of God. Look at verse 27 again. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Now this is peculiar indeed. The woman is asking for life for her daughter, and yet Jesus is talking about the dinner table and who gets first rights to the food. I mean, what's going on here? And more than that, did I just hear Jesus compare this woman's request to that of a dog begging? What is that supposed to mean?

This is a phrase that has caused a lot of scrutiny and examining, and interpreters take different stances on this. Some interpreters believe that Jesus is claiming to this woman how unworthy her request is. Some commentators suggest that Israel is the children in this narrative, and the

Gentiles are their dogs, because of the viewpoint that, you know, very rightfully as the commentator is trying to parse out, that Jesus' ministry was first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. And while there are some benefits and merits to these interpretations, I think there's a lack of understanding of a component of what Jesus is saying. And me and some other commentators would take this passage to mean something else. There is much more here than meets the eyes when it comes to these peculiar words. I don't believe that this passage is talking to and referring to Gentiles as dogs, because Jesus doesn't even use the pejorative word for dogs that the Jews would have for the Gentiles here in this passage. He uses a kinder, friendlier word for dog that's meant to be included into the family language. Jesus isn't trying to respond out of frustration or belittling her personhood or belittling the Gentiles here. Right? No, he understands who is coming into the kingdom of God. He fully knows that the Gentiles are part of his plan. But Jesus has something more subtle, more gentle, more gracious and glorious in mind with this statement that he gives in verse 27.

But before we break down his peculiar response, we must understand something about the woman's request here. Turn with me to Matthew 15:22, where the story is recounted. You can hold your place in Mark 7. And I want you to notice something here that Mark does hint at, but I think Matthew spells out here a little bit more bluntly, so that we can understand here. Matthew 15:22. Now this passage refers to the Canaanite woman. The Syrophenician—they're interchangeable terms. And if you look at verse 22: "Behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.'" Now that's very interesting. That is very, very interesting. That should stop us dead in our tracks when we read that passage. Now Mark hints at this, too, when he states that Jesus wishes to be hidden and the woman somehow finds him. But Matthew fleshes this point out even more to reveal a very important reality, and this is what leads to Jesus's peculiar response.

This "unworthy" woman joins a very exclusive group in Mark's narrative. Jairus, the synagogue ruler in Chapter 5 of Mark. The man possessed by a demon. The woman who had a blood discharge. The leper. The paralytic. What do all these people have in common? And now the Syrophenician woman. They're the only ones who get who Jesus really is. Why would a Syrophenician call this rabbi 'Lord'? Why would she even mention his lineage to the Davidic kingdom? Why would she even call Jesus 'the Son of David,' unless she knew that he was a king, and the only one that could bring healing to her daughter. How else would she even go about finding Jesus, and trying to find a Jesus who wished to be hidden, unless she knew more about the power of Christ and his identity than anyone else around her.

This can only mean one thing. That the supposedly 'unworthy' woman—from the outside—would appear to have no access to Christ whatsoever, is actually underneath more qualified to speak to Jesus than any other. So Jesus in his response, he's dealing with two realities. One, where Jesus knows what the other people are thinking about this woman, coming before him, giving an unworthy request, and one that knows exactly what she's talking about. He sees her faith. She understands who Christ really is.

And this is what leads to Jesus's response. He's dealing with this tension of what's on the outside of the cup and what's on the inside of the cup. He's dealing with what defiles a person, what Pastor Randy was talking about last week. And he's trying to attack the idea... That it's not

about a person's religious, ethnic, social background, not what foods they eat, whether they're married or not, the health of their children, or whether they're keeping up with the Joneses, or whether they look nice in a Howard County kind of lifestyle, or whether they're maintaining the average median income. It has nothing to do with these realities. These aren't signs of faithfulness. It has everything to do with the inward heart. The faith of a person, the acknowledgement of Christ as King, in our desperation to go to Christ to fulfill our deepest need. So Jesus's response, as peculiar as it is, it's not meant to insult her or to demean her position, but rather it's used as a parable. It's an illustration. It's sort of a tongue-in-cheek question. A question that's sort of more like a devil's advocate position. It's a question that a Christian teacher would ask their students when faced in conversation with arguments against Christianity.

Jesus is sort of asking the Syrophenician woman, in sort of a devil's advocate fashion, why would someone who is viewed as a Gentile receive the benefits and the blessings of the kingdom? Wink, wink, nod, nod. Or why should the pet dog receive the benefits which only belong to children? I mean, that's what everyone is thinking about you, right? How are you going to respond? This is a challenge, but it's a loving and a playful one. Not merely to just question her forthright, per se, but also to reveal the hearts of those around her. He is simultaneously presenting the legalistic view that he wants to destroy, and yet at the same time denounces it, and wants to use the woman's response to show how the religious people around her have gotten it all wrong.

The tension in this is palatable. Here is someone who is supposedly your enemy, begging for help, pleading for mercy, and Jesus is saying to this woman: You know, a typical legalistic, religious Christian would treat you like this. What say you? Or maybe to put it in even greater relevance for us here today. . . Maybe think about that person, someone who you believe doesn't deserve any mercy in your life, comes and asks you for some. This person has done nothing but harm and hurt and destroy you. They've been nothing but a thorn in your flesh and annoyance at your side. They have done nothing but to talk behind your back, destroy your credibility and reputation. And now out of the blue they come to you in their greatest weakness and in your greatest weariness and they ask you for grace. What say you?

Jesus is asking this woman: What do you think of these people who would say that this is what you deserve? And here we see, out of this woman, a most **Worthy Response**. Yes, Lord, she says, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. This is so, so good. It's so brilliant how she responds. Because the beauty that's missed in this passage, you know, the point that is missed often stories, like when I was messing up the green frog story as a child, and all the overlooking that we don't see here—it is the beauty and the force of where Mark positions this woman's response in his Gospel. Did you catch it?

You see, Jesus, up until this point—and we've been going about this for weeks—he's been telling parables left and right. And every time when he gives a parable, what happens? They don't understand what he's saying. They always ask Jesus what are you talking about? Sower? Light under a basket? Jesus, explain this to me. I have no idea what you're saying. And yet for the very first time, this perceived unworthy person with an unworthy request, she is able to read between the lines and understand Jesus's words. She is the first person, a Gentile enemy of the kingdom—supposedly—of God, gets Jesus and his parable.

Can you not see what the glory of what Mark intends this to mean? Can we not see the implications of this to all of us here in this room today. Don't you get it? This means that Jesus is proclaiming this moment, and Mark is saying to all of us here, that there is no one who is beyond the reaches of the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ. There is no one who is on unreachable for his kingdom. No matter what they have done, no matter their perceived opposition. This means that the salvation message, the good news of the Gospel we proclaim, is greater than any single one of our evangelical challenges. This is greater than our fears and insecurities and all the self-doubt that we have, thinking though surely I am not good enough to proclaim God's word to this person. This means that the work of evangelism and missions is fueled by an almighty God, who takes a person who was deemed to be cold and hostile to the gospel, and brings them in to be called children of God, worthy to sit at the table. Do you understand?

This is so beautiful, the way that he presents it here. The gospel is free and available to all who would come to the table and confess Jesus Christ is Lord. She understands that Jesus is the Son of God. She understands that even the smallest amount, even the crumbs of grace to an unworthy sinner is sufficient enough for her. That's why she persists. That's why she cannot be contained. That's why she's appealing to this Christ.

But Jesus delights not in just giving her crumbs, does he. No. He grants her request, and he reveals her place in the kingdom—not just for the Jew, but also for the Gentile, for you and for me. And he shows everyone that no matter what lifestyle or background that you came from, you can be a worthy recipient of the table, not based on your merit, but by his. To belong to a people, when you were once not a people. That's the beauty of this passage. This is more than just a parable about children and dogs. Jesus is shaking down the very paradigm of what we imagine to belong to the people of God. It's a desperation that would cause us to bring our unworthy requests to sit at his feet, to respond in worship and faith and understanding and in love. Not so that we can get what we want out of this life, but so that we can receive the feast of fellowship of the Lord who brings us to his banqueting table.

My prayer and hope for every single one of us here today, no matter where you see yourself—maybe you see yourself like this Syrophenician woman—my prayer is that you would see yourself. . .Yes, in your sin unworthy to come to God and approach his throne, but redeemed through the blood of Christ, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. He calls you his friend when you were once his enemy. He looks at you and me, covered in all of our sin, and says to you, my child, come and eat. And so we will get to do that right now.

So with that, let's pray. Father, we are so blessed that we can come before your table to receive more than just crumbs, but to receive the reminder and the assurance of what you have done for us in our sins, of the hope that we have in you. That no matter our background, no matter what we've done, we are still not so far removed as to be able to return and repent and believe and trust in your goodness. Thank you for giving us this time in your word. And in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.