

"Even the Little Dogs"

If two teenage girls are gossiping about another girl, and say "she's a dog," they probably do not have the best intentions in mind. On the other hand, if two salesmen are talking about another salesman and say, "he's top dog," they are probably complimenting that person. What's my point? In English, we can refer to someone as "dog" in different contexts; some are insulting and belittling, and some can even be complimentary. Context and idiom determine how we understand a reference to someone being a type of dog.

I bring this up because some people have accused Jesus as being derogatory toward this Gentile woman in our passage. It was of course common for Jews at that time to speak slanderously against the Gentiles by calling them dogs. Certainly this common Jewish practice was a derogatory insult. Even in Scripture, there are some passages that clearly use the label "dog" as a bad thing. For example, Revelation 22:15 says, "But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie."

So was Jesus just picking up this common slur of the day and putting it upon this poor woman? Was Jesus just being racist and culturally elite? No, I do not believe he was. It's quite possible that he had this Jewish slur in mind when he spoke with this woman. But I don't believe he made his comments in a derogatory fashion. A first hint of Jesus' intention is that he doesn't call her a "dog", he calls her a "little dog". The typical Jewish slur referred to dogs in general, as the kind that scavenged wildly. You know, the kind in the Old Testament that ate the bones of the bad kings instead of them getting a proper burial. But Jesus calls her a little dog. This actually referred to a specific class of dogs. It didn't refer to a wild dog, but it referred to a pet dog. This was the house dog that lived with the family, that sat under the table during mealtime. It was the family pet.

Now certainly, there is a big difference between calling someone a wild scavenging dog in a derogatory way, and referring to someone as a beloved family pet. And yet, you could still rightly point out that nonetheless Jesus was still putting her in a lower status by referring to her as a pet. Isn't that still insulting, even if said in a loving way?

Well, as we look at this passage, I hope to show you that Jesus was not intending to insult her. What actually seems to be going on is a teaching moment by Jesus. Remember, Jesus regularly taught in parables. That's essentially what I believe Jesus is doing here. I believe that his speaking of little dogs, and children, and eating bread, is essentially a sort of parable, almost even a sort of proverbial saying, in which he is making an important point. And what is that important point? I believe he is prophesying of the Gentile inclusion - that salvation would not remain only among the Jews, but would go out to the nations. I believe Jesus' words point to that, and his miracle illustrates it. So, let's look at this important passage. And remember, most of us, maybe all of us here today, are Gentiles. And so this passage contains good news for us, and will be of great encouragement as we hear about God's plan that he had to save even us!

And, I'd like to note, that we'll focus our discussion on verses 24-30: the interaction with this Gentile woman. But I read the remaining verses in this chapter because they include Jesus going on to other Gentile areas in the region of

the Decapolis. Some have speculated if the deaf-mute man in verse 32 who was healed was also a Gentile, since it seems that Jesus was still in Gentile territory at that time. We can't know for sure. I actually tend to think for several reasons that he was a Jew and that this was a miracle among the Jews who lived in this Gentile territory. But, nonetheless, this would still have been a miracle done in a Gentile region and certainly from that perspective alone complements what we are studying today as we hone in on Jesus ministry to this Gentile woman.

So, I'd like to begin then by giving some background on the differences between Jew and Gentile. First, know that God, is the God of all creation. He created Jew and Gentile. He is the God of all people. And yet humanity sinned. They rebelled against God. All of us -- we all turned away from him. The world was marked out by an overall rebellion against God. And so God put a plan of redemption and salvation into action. But how did he do that? Well, we find early on that he did that by calling a man named Abraham. He called Abraham to leave his home and go into a Promised Land. And God promised to Abraham, to make a great nation through his offspring. This great nation would be a people that were chosen by God in a special way to be his people. From Abraham, a holy people would come forth, a people to whom God would bring salvation. In other words, God's plan to save humans from their sin and rebellion would for a time be focused on Abraham and his offspring. That is whom God would first bring human salvation to. They would be the recipients of God's saving blessings.

And so Abraham had a son Isaac, and Isaac had a son Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel, God's chosen people. After a time of slavery in Egypt, God rescued the Israelites and brought them into the Promised Land and taught them his laws. He gave them three kinds of laws. Moral laws: like do not kill, do not commit adultery. Civil laws, that especially set out civil punishments for breaking God's laws, such as repaying four-fold when you stole from someone. And lastly ceremonial laws; laws that told the people how they should worship God in ceremonial cleanness, which at the same time visibly separated them from the pagan practices of the rest of the nations around them. For example, one ceremonial law was eating pork. The Gentile nations ate pork. The Jews were commanded not to. That served to visibly separate Jew from Gentile. It separated those who were specially chosen as God's people from the rest of the world. There were numerous visible markers in God's ceremonial laws that said, "These are God's people."

You can understand that certain Jews might start to get prideful: I'm of God's chosen race. God has saved us. I keep all God's laws that identify me as part of his people. You pagan nations do not. You're an outsider. You're just an unclean dog. Of course, the Jews who took this attitude had missed the point. God didn't come to save just Israel. In fact, just being an Israelite didn't even make you saved. Many people in Israel's history made that clear. Many Israelites rebelled against God and faced eternal judgment. That was the problem with the Pharisees last week. They thought mere outward keeping of God's ceremonial laws marked you out as God's people and therefore meant you were saved. But God cared about the heart, about people realizing that salvation was not in outward law keeping, but that salvation comes from God - that salvation comes by faith in God as savior, not in faith in one's own ability to keep the law. Man had already shown in the Garden that he couldn't keep God's laws.

You see, this was the whole plan of God! God did not choose the nation of Israel so that he would only save Israel. God chose Israel to be the vehicle through whom he would bring salvation to the whole earth. That is what he said right from the start. When he called Abraham, he promised him that he would bless all the nations of the earth through his seed. God reaffirmed that promise to the patriarch Jacob

as well. And we see God sending reminders throughout the history of Israel that God was not just about saving one ethnic people. Instead, it would be through the chosen people of Israel, that all God's chosen people would find salvation - Jew and Gentile. So ultimately, the true Israel, those who are truly God's chosen, saved, people, are not divided upon ethnic lines, but upon lines of faith in the savior. This savior, the Messiah, would come from the lineage of the Jews, as the promised seed, but he would be the savior of the whole world. That whosoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

We see this confirmed in the New Testament as well. In Acts 10, Jesus would appear to the Apostle Peter in a vision and explicitly tell him that God was making the Gentiles clean. Jesus would make abundantly clear at that time that his salvation was for both Jew and Gentile. We read earlier in the service the passage from Ephesians 2 which described how Jesus abolished the division between Jew and Gentile by his flesh - in other words, by the cross! But what was this dividing wall? It was the law. Specifically, it was the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament that divided between Jew and Gentile. In the Old Testament, the Jews who kept the ceremonial laws were marked as God's people. Everyone else was not; they were on the outside. But with the coming of Christ, he would make both Jew and Gentile "clean." He would accomplish this on the cross. But of course, at the point of time of our passage in Mark here, the cross had not yet happened.

And so this sets the context for what's going on here in our passage. God had always planned to bring salvation to all the nations, but he would do it through the seed of Abraham. Since Jesus was the promised seed, the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's people was imminent. Salvation was soon to be extended to all the nations. Because of God's promises, in some sense it always had been, but with the coming of Jesus, this salvation was now especially beginning to come to the nations.

But Jesus, in his teaching ministry, was sent specifically to God's people. He was to call God's people back to God. He was to teach them that the promised salvation had arrived. That's who Jesus was primarily sent to in terms of his teaching ministry. In terms of a salvation mission, his mission was much broader than that. Jesus would save people from all over, people who were already part of God's community, and people who weren't. This mean he'd save both Jews and Gentiles. But his teaching ministry was primarily focused to the community of God's people at that time. And who was that community made up of? It was made primarily of Jews as God's chosen nation. So that is why Jesus is recorded in Matthew's gospel as telling this same Gentile woman, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:24).

So for a Jew to call a Gentile a dog was to point to their ceremonial uncleanness, which represented that they were outsiders. They were not part of God's people; they were outside of his covenant. Though the Jews who did this, did it in a derogatory sense, a sense that was not in line with God's bigger picture, it did point out an important reality. The Gentiles were outsiders in terms of God's covenant. They needed salvation announced and extended to them. This is the background I want us to have as we now turn more specifically to the details in this passage.

Look at verse 24. Jesus leaves Galilee and heads up to Tyre and Sidon. These cities were outside Israel, part of the pagan Gentile nations. And it says that Jesus wanted to remain hidden there, but couldn't. He was probably trying to get away with his disciples, to finally get that R&R that they had been wanting. But it was not to be. Verse 24 tells us that he could not be hidden. You might recall back to Mark 3:8; people from Tyre and Sidon had already been traveling to Galilee

to see Jesus. Word had already spread about Jesus and his miracles beyond the borders of Israel. So despite their efforts to get away and remain anonymous, that was just not possible, even among the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon.

And these cities were not just any Gentile cities. Looking at their biblical history, they had grown a bad name for themselves. They became infamous for their paganism. Two examples. One, the evil Queen Jezebel came from Sidon bringing the worship of the false god Baal into the land of Israel. Two, according to the prophet Joel, the people of Tyre and Sidon sold Jews into slavery to the Greeks. And so it is no wonder why we see various prophets of the Old Testament prophesying against these two coastal cities. To show you how infamous they had become, Jesus speaks out in Luke 10:13 against two *Jewish* cities in Galilee. And he says to these Jewish cities, "If the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes." Jesus said this to the Jews' shame, but think about what this says about Tyre and Sidon. It says that everyone acknowledged those two cities as being synonymous with paganism. They had become a sort of byword for wickedness. Tyre and Sidon had become almost a proverbial identification for paganism. It is to this place that Jesus and his disciples had come. As would be foreshadowed by Jesus' interaction with this Gentile woman, faith and blessings were coming to the Gentiles, even to places like Tyre and Sidon.

So that is Jesus' setting in this passage. He had come to the wicked cities of Tyre and Sidon. But it doesn't seem at this point he has come to do ministry. It seems he had come to get away. And yet ministry found him. This Gentile woman, a Greek Syro-Phoenician woman, came to him because her daughter was demon-possessed. And verse 26 tells us that she was persistent. She kept asking Jesus to help. She wouldn't take no for an answer!

But Jesus responds to her in verse 27 with this parable-like statement. He says, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." This certainly implies that the woman, along with other Gentiles, are being compared with little pet dogs. The children in that case would be the Jews. More pointedly, I would say that Jesus means to say that the children are God's people, which at this point in redemptive history would be identified visibly with the Jewish nation. Everyone else, are those outside God's covenant community, which would be the pagan gentiles. The pagan gentiles are referred to as little pet dogs.

Certainly, Jesus had come first to God's covenant people. That's what he said explicitly in the Matthew account of this event. And certainly the chosen Jewish people were rightly thought of as children. The Apostle Paul acknowledged the benefits of the nation of Israel when he said in Romans 9:4, that to the Israelites "belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever." And so Jesus was sent first to God's people, his adopted children.

But as I mentioned, Jesus was not sent only to bless the Jews. Ultimately, he would bring salvation to all the nations. He gives that hope even here in his words. Notice, Jesus says, "Let the children be filled *first*." Do you see a gleam of hope in his words? "First." That implies that after the children are fed, the little pet dogs can be fed. Jesus implies a primacy to God's covenant people, but that ultimately others would be fed too.

And how wonderfully this Gentile woman picks up on this hope. "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." In other words,

she proposes that the pet dogs don't have to wait to be fed after the children with whatever is left. They can actually benefit at the same time as the children, hungrily eating up whatever crumbs and scraps fall to the floor as the children eat. In other words, the woman, persistent as she is, sees a glimmer of hope in Jesus' parable-like words, and responds in faith.

Notice, this alone should tell us that Jesus didn't speak in a derogatory way to the woman. If he did, then she would probably be offended, maybe curse him, and leave. But that's not what happened. Jesus lovingly took the common Jewish slur of "dog" and refers to her instead as a beloved little pet dog who would indeed be fed by the master. But she asks, "Why must that feeding wait?" And of course, Jesus sees her faith, praises her faith, and gives her assurance that her daughter has been set free from the demon.

And I think this idea of the little pet dogs hungrily eating up the crumbs that the children miss, is a great illustration of what God was doing in the first place with Israel. God had chosen to bring salvation to Israel, not to exclude the world, but to excite the world. Israel as a nation was to be a witness to the world. It was to draw people to God through its special relationship with God. The nations were to see God at work among Israel and ultimately turn to God themselves. And so God's relationship with Israel was to excite the nations to come to him, not to exclude the nations. And so this picture of hungry pet dogs eating up the scraps seems to illustrate this. Have you ever had a pet dog sitting by the table, waiting for food to fall? They can often get extremely excited, and as soon as the food falls, they race over to it to gobble it up. That is how the Gentiles were to respond to God and his salvation. God's work among Israel was to draw them to God as hungry excited little pet dogs. And isn't that what we see the woman doing here? She is very excited. She is hungry and excited, so to speak. She is so persistent in her coming to Jesus, just like a hungry little pet dog waiting anxiously for food.

And so this dialogue between Jesus and this Gentile woman represents hope for the Gentiles. The Gentiles would be fed by Jesus. They would be recipients of the blessings of salvation. They would be offered a place in the kingdom of God. After Pentecost, when the twelve apostles are sent out, this becomes a reality, where the church explicitly sends missionaries out to the Gentiles. The Apostle Paul especially became a messenger of the gospel to the Gentiles. But Jesus' dialogue with this woman says that already those blessings would start to be received by the Gentiles. Already there would be crumbs of faith and blessing falling to the Gentiles. So this dialogue with Jesus and the Gentile woman is a foretaste of the Gentile inclusion into the kingdom of God. The Gentile inclusion is foretold and foreseen here.

And this Gentile inclusion is illustrated by Jesus' miracle here. In other words, Jesus miracle confirms the truth of his words. Jesus and the Gentile woman talk about how God's blessings would come to the Gentiles, and how even now some benefits were already coming. Here that truth is confirmed by Jesus' miracle and the woman's response. Because in the miracle, we see God's blessings already coming to a Gentile. And in the working of this miracle, we see a Gentile with faith in Jesus. And so we have here blessings and faith. Blessings and faith had come to the Gentiles. And think about this woman's faith. It was a strong enough faith that she believed Jesus when he merely told her that her daughter had been healed. She didn't make Jesus actually go to her daughter and lay hands on her. She didn't think Jesus was just trying to get rid of her - "Oh, it's okay, you can go home, she's all healed." No Jesus but spoke, assuring the woman that her daughter was healed, and the Gentile woman believed. She went home in faith and found her daughter healed. Blessing and faith had come to the Gentiles.

And just to make abundantly clear the point here - what was the miracle Jesus did here? He exorcised the demon-possessed daughter of this Gentile woman. Jesus regularly cast out unclean spirits among the Jews. And I've pointed out several times how this was a sign that the kingdom of God was at hand. Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom, and then he'd exorcise demons. The removal of demons was a symbol of the coming kingdom because it showed that the enemy, Satan, was being dealt with. And now this sign of the coming kingdom was given to the Gentiles. This speaks as clearly as anything, that the kingdom was coming to them as well. The kingdom of God was not only coming to the Jews, but as seen as here in this miracle, it was coming to the Gentiles as well.

And if anyone was to receive the blessings of the kingdom, Jew or Gentile, it would ultimately be because of Christ's work on the cross. You see, if anyone is a child of God, if anyone is a true child of the kingdom, it is Jesus. If the Jews could be likened here as children eating from the table, it could only be as *adopted* children of God. Yet Jesus was not an adopted child, he is the only begotten Son of God. And yet, in order for any human to be adopted as children and brought into God's household, sin had to be dealt with. Jesus did that on the cross. And on that cross, Jesus would be forsaken by the father, as he bore our sin on the cross. Jesus would cry out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" On the cross, Jesus would be cast off as son. He would be forsaken. He became less than even a pet dog in the house of the master. And why did he do this? So that his chosen people could be adopted as his children. This adoption came first to the Jews, but it ultimately would come even to the Gentiles.

Did you catch that last point? The adoption of children remains not only with the Jews, but now comes even to the Gentiles. Because Jesus suffered on the cross, taking on for a time the fate worse than a pet dog, Jew and Gentile can join together at the table of God as adopted sons and daughters. Ephesians 1:5 tells us that we now are adopted children of God. Think about that. If we who were once far off, not a part of God's community of saints, not recipients of his blessings - if we could start receiving those blessings, even as little pet dogs, wouldn't that be amazing? If we could be but little pet dogs in our great master's house, getting to eat but the crumbs that fall from the table of the great God, wouldn't that alone be wonderful? Shouldn't that alone make us content? Shouldn't we be content to be but little pet dogs in God's house? Yes, we should.

And yet the gospel declares to us, that we have been made so much more! We now are united with the children, even with all the Jewish saints of old. We have been united together as one holy chosen people. We now all make up the new Israel, one chosen people, called by God, given the title of sons and daughter of the most High God. What an amazing blessing has come to all the nations of the world!

And so, since Christ has united us together in this way, that makes us a family. That makes us a family with so many different sorts of people, from different times, and places, different cultures, different languages, different ethnicities. Christianity is not an American religion. It is not a western religion. But it's not just a Jewish or Middle Eastern one either. It is one made up from people from every tongue, tribe, and nation. And so, since Christ has united us together as a family, as brothers and sisters sitting at God's table, let's remember what unites us. We have a common faith and we have common blessings. Faith and blessings. That is what unites us. We have unity in the faith, and we have unity in God's blessings to us - especially that blessing of salvation from death and damnation, to receive instead the gift of eternal life.

We celebrate our union as one family today, even with the sacraments. In the baptism today, we celebrate the bringing of another member into God's covenant community. As little Will is baptized, he is brought into the covenant community as a child of God, to receive the blessings that belong to us who are a part of this community. And after that, we'll celebrate our union through the Lord's Supper. Of course, we call the Supper, "Communion," because it represents our fellowship with each other and with the Lord. And so in these sacraments, we celebrate our union as one family in Christ today!

I'd like to close with one final note. I'd like to finish with a call to evangelism. I'd like to charge us all to go to the nations with this gospel message. In verse 24, we find that Jesus was not yet seeking to begin a full blown ministry to the Gentiles. And yet it says that he could not be hid. And when the Gentiles came as hungry little pet dogs, he did not refuse them, but gave them a foretaste of the blessing that would later be poured out to all the nations. If Jesus did not hold back these blessings at that point in redemptive history; if his ministry could not be hidden from them at that time, how much more ought we to go to the nations now with the gospel! For we live now after the cross. We live now in the point of redemptive history where the division between Jew and Gentile has been done away with by the cross of Jesus Christ. How much more must our ministry not be hid from the nations. And so let us each "go!" Let us each go to the world with the gifts God has given us, testifying to what he has done for us. Amen.

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