

## **“Dare to Love”**

**Mark 7:24-37**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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Did Jesus ever take a vacation? I doubt he would have used that word, but he did suspend his activities for a period of time to go to the Mediterranean coast to rest and relax. What he quickly discovered, though, is there was no place he could go where people would leave him alone. Even in the coastal villages of Tyre and Sidon, an area of the Syrian Province heavily populated by Gentiles, people came looking for him.

One of those individuals was a gentile woman whose daughter was ill. Upon finding Jesus, she begged him to heal her.

Jesus' response has disturbed and puzzled theologians ever since. Instead of compassionately receiving this woman and responding to her need as he had done with so many others, it appears he was insensitive and rude. Jesus informed this woman he had been sent to minister to the Jews and not the Gentiles, at least not yet.

“Let the children be fed first,” he said to her, “for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

I am sure you are not surprised at the attention these words have received. They seem to be so out of character for Jesus. **How do you explain them?**

Was Jesus this irritated and religiously biased? Or, did he say these words with a slight smile on his face because this was the way other rabbis had responded to her and he was mimicking them, while leaving the door open for her to push back? Whatever his motive was, she wasted no time in replying.

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Upon hearing this, Jesus ended the discussion and granted her request.

Mark follows this story with another one which may have occurred a few miles north of Tyre, a coastal village by the name of Sidon. The text is not clear about the precise location of

this miracle. If it took place around Sidon, rather than the Decapolis, then this, too, would have been an area heavily populated by Gentiles.

Some men brought to Jesus a friend who had a speech impediment and a hearing problem. Like the woman from Tyre, they begged Jesus to heal him, which he did, this time without any reservations. In spite of his request that no one tell what he had done, the people shared this good news with all their neighbors.

**What was Mark's purpose for including these two stories?** What sets them apart from the nine previous miracles Jesus performed? Perhaps it is this.

**What is the most striking feature of these two stories?** Could it be, in the minds of many people, including the religious leaders of that day, Jesus was not supposed to help these two individuals, if in fact both of them were Gentiles?

We know for sure the woman was a Gentile, and according to tradition she was inferior to the Jews and unworthy of Jesus' time and attention, especially in a part of the world where Jewish peasant farmers were not treated well by their neighbors. No one would have faulted Jesus for denying her petition. As a matter of fact, they would have expected him to do this and use this harsh language. He came to minister to his own people first, and many believed only his people.

Besides, Jesus went to Tyre to relax and get away from the crowds. By this time, he was under heavy attack from the Pharisees who considered him a heretic and Herod who saw him as a menace. This woman should have respected his privacy and need for rest.

Why did Jesus heal these two individuals? The people around them pleaded their case, and evidently, did so quite well, especially the child's mother. Jesus even attributed this miracle, not to her faith, but her good debating skills.

**Now, what was Mark's message to his readers, including us?** Let me suggest these.

**Love people others don't.** I am confident Mark's readers were struggling to be good to those who were different, especially Gentiles, and those who did not treat them well. There must have been believers who were not building bridges of understanding, reconciliation and goodwill, but walls of suspicion and hate. Mark was not content to let this continue, and told these two stories to change their minds and behavior.

Who are you struggling to love today? Who are the "gentiles" among you who don't deserve your time or attention?

It is easy to love the people everybody else loves and those who are good to us. There is nothing risky or difficult about this. We are called, however, to love not only the loveable, but the unlovely; to love those who are like us and those who are quite different from us.

As Christians, we do not choose the people we are going to love, but make room in our lives for all who come our way in need of help. When this happens to you this week, I hope you will do as Jesus did when he helped those others ignored.

**Listen to people who have a different perspective on life.** Can you imagine how hard it must have been for this woman to confront Jesus when he did not readily grant her request to heal her daughter? It took a lot of courage after Jesus used the language of most rabbis in that situation for her to remind him that even household pets eat the scraps which fall to the floor. Surely, he could throw some soiled bread her way.

And how did he respond to her counter-argument? He saw the logic in her argument and granted her wish.

One thing I love about this passage is that Jesus teaches us how to lose an argument. When he realized her logic was stronger than his, he quit arguing and granted her request.

When was the last time you lost an argument graciously? Even when we know we are wrong, it is hard to admit it, isn't it? Most of the time, our pride won't let us go there.

Who do you need to listen to today? Whose perspective on life are you struggling to hear? What difference would it make if you put down your defenses, suspended your understanding of truth, and listened with an open mind and heart?

I am aware this is not easy. Evidently it wasn't for Jesus that day, but he did it. I hope you will, too.

**Speak for people who have no voice.** In each story, someone had to speak on behalf of the one who needed help. Without an advocate, neither person had any hope of receiving assistance.

Isn't this the task of the church? Aren't we supposed to usher to the front of the line those who cannot speak or whose voices are ignored? Isn't it our responsibility to make room at the table of decision-making for those whose voices are normally muted?

I certainly think so and evidently Mark did, too.

**Let other people interrupt you when they need help.** To perform both miracles, Jesus had to interrupt his schedule. This in itself was not so hard, but he knew it would lead to

countless others coming to him with their requests. In spite of this, he reached out to those who needed what he had to offer.

Who were you too busy for last week? Who were you unable to make room for in your life? Who, on the other hand, made room for you? Do you realize they considered you more important than what they were doing?

I have tried to let Leonard Griffith's definition of a servant guide me throughout my ministry. "A servant is one who responds to another's need at their convenience and does not expect gratitude," he writes in We Have This Ministry. Is this your understanding of what it means to be a servant? It certainly was modeled by Jesus, wasn't it?

One thing Mark wanted his readers to understand is that God was at work in this man called Jesus. He also wanted them to know why. It was because Jesus loved people others didn't, listened to people with an open mind and heart and interrupted his schedule over and over to help those in need.

**Do you see the point Mark was making?** We can do what Jesus did. We can adopt the heart and mind of Christ and follow in his footsteps. We can love people, listen to them and when necessary, speak for them, even if it means setting aside our agendas. And when we do, God will be at work in our lives, too.

Give it a try this week.