

## Mystery in the Kingdom: Offensive Good News

Mark 7:24-37

July 4, 2021

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Is it wrong to say something offensive if you know that it won't offend the person you are talking to?

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If you are new with us we are in the middle of a series titled "Mystery in the Kingdom." Here Jesus is opening up truths about His kingdom that don't line up with what anyone would suspect. And as we've seen, most of the stories revolve around Jesus' refusal to remove doubt from the equation – Jesus will not prove Himself to people.

So you know how magicians do tricks for the purpose of convincing people that they are amazing. But Jesus was so different. Instead of using His miracles to drive people to their knees – something He had the power to do – His miracles were done in such a way that people could experience them and then, if they chose to harbour unbelief, could walk away unchanged.

And Jesus did the same thing with His teaching. He could have taught in a way that convinced people He was God – He was a perfect communicator – but instead He taught in such a way that if you chose to harbour unbelief you could still walk away.

There's mystery in Jesus' gospel nobody would have made this up. But while Jesus refuses to remove doubt He also comes to us in exactly the way we need. And we see that in today's text which is perhaps the most mysterious story of the bunch – If you haven't scratched your head over this one you haven't read it correctly.

So if you've got a Bible we are going to pick it up in Mark 7 starting in verse 24. And as you are finding that would you please stand with me in hunger to hear God unpack the mystery of His gospel into our hearts. Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read Mark 7:24-37]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Two stories tied together by location. So Tyre and Sidon were situated some 60 kilometers north of Galilee in a Gentile region. And verse 24 sets the context for us with Jesus attempting to keep His presence there a secret. What's this about?<sup>1</sup>

Well Jesus' entire ministry was directed towards Jews, and Samaritans, who had a Jewish background. And His ministry was so successful that there were constantly crowds of people begging for attention. And as a result He would often look for quiet places of escape.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/goodness-and-severity-5461/> (Accessed July 1, 2021)

And this text is His biggest attempt in that direction as He leaves Jewish territory altogether. But His reputation still precedes Him and this Greek woman, in verse 25, falls at His feet and begs Him to drive a demon out of her daughter.

Now it's strange that this Gentile woman interacts with Jesus at all. Jesus rarely even spoke with Gentiles as His primary focus was the Jews. But even beyond this it would have been faux-pa for a woman to approach a rabbi at all – this just didn't happen.

And so this woman is being incredibly brazen. Now Mark doesn't extrapolate much but Matthew tells us that she didn't just beg once, she went on begging and following Jesus around in an embarrassing and awkward way. And finally the disciples told Jesus:

“Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us!” (Matthew 15:23)

But this isn't surprising because she's a mom – and not just the shouting bit. Everyone knows that dads are alright, but if you are being bullied by the big kid at school – or in my case if you were so runty that you were being bullied by the girls – and you needed an advocate, then mom is who you need. Because if you can trigger the mother bear then you are going to get stuff done.

And so it isn't surprising that this woman goes to Jesus and won't take “no” for an answer because she's advocating for her daughter. But what is surprising is the way she responds when Jesus' words could have easily turned her off. So in verse 27 Jesus tells her:

“First I should feed the children—My own family, the Jews. It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.” (Mark 7:27)

Wow! Jesus implies she is a dog. That's incredibly insulting. So what going on here?

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Well first of all you need to know calling someone a dog in the first century wasn't any better than someone a dog today. It's not an endearing term.

And that's in spite of the fact that people have always loved dogs as pets. And now with COVID even people who don't love dogs have them as pets. A COVID puppy named Pepper showed up at my house. He doesn't seem to mind that I call him Pooper. I wasn't a fan at the beginning but we are growing on each other. Dogs are great.

And people had pet dogs in the first century too – especially in gentile area. But there were also wild dogs who lived in the garbage piles and that kind of thing. And so calling someone a dog wasn't a friendly thing to do. It's always been an insult.

And it was a particularly common insult the Jews used to refer to gentiles because they were unclean. This means it wouldn't have been surprising to hear a Jew like Jesus speak this way. But coming from a rabbi it would have stung. So is Jesus a racist? Or are we misunderstanding something here?

The answer is no, and maybe. The truth is Jesus' words are offensive, but they are also a parable. It's a short parable. But it is a parable.

So a parable is a metaphor. It's saying this is like that. And that's what Jesus is doing here. And we get a hint this way because the word Jesus uses for "dog" is not the common word everyone used, but essentially the word "puppy."

And this lady is a mom. And as the exchange progresses we realize she understands the picture Jesus is painting.

So Jesus is saying "You know how this works. The kids eat at the table first and then the pets eat later. And the order is important. Pooper never eats first. He gets to lick the dishes after.

And here's the parable. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah first. He spent all His time in Israel with the exception of this moment. And His job was to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies and bring redemption to God's people.

So Jesus became the better prophet than Moses and the better priest than Aaron and the better king than David. And when He died His blood became the blood of the New Covenant. This is the way God ordained it to be. It had to be Israel first because Israel was whom God had made the initial covenant with.

It's only after Jesus comes back from the dead that things change, and He tells His followers "It's time now to go make disciples of all nations."

But at this point in the story salvation is still directed to the Jews. And that's what Jesus is saying: "You gentile puppies can't eat yet, it's not your time."

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Now, as cute as that might sound, don't get me wrong. This is offensive. Jesus is telling this woman: "You're unclean like a dog, and you don't qualify to be saved." So how would you respond if Jesus said that to you? It would have been so easy for this woman to get offended. And if she had then this story simply wouldn't be in the Bible.

But she doesn't. And instead she responds brilliantly with humility, tact and respect. And this gentile woman is the first person in Mark to understand a parable of Jesus.

So in verse 28 she replies:

"That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children's plates." (Mark 7:28)

Or you could translate this "The puppies under the table are allowed to eat what falls from the children's plates." And isn't this what happens? Pooper doesn't get to lick plates till the kids finish, but he knows that whatever hits the floor is fair game. And he's not losing weight at our house.

And so what this woman is saying is “I get it. I’m not supposed to be at the table. I’m not an Israelite. I don’t worship the God of the Bible. I’m not part of the family, and it’s not my turn. And more than that I get that I am unclean like a dog. I’m not worthy of what You have to offer. But I can see there’s more than enough on Your table for everyone in the world. So please, You are in Tyre now dropping scraps of Your time to us gentiles, so let me have mine now.”

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Wow! Do you see that this woman is being incredibly respectful while at the same time wrestling with Jesus. And this is what God’s people do. Remember Abraham standing next to Sodom? “God will you spare the city if there are 50 or 40 or 30 or 20 or 10?”

Or what about Jacob wrestling with God in the night and saying “I won’t let You go until You bless me.” And God did and He changed His name to Israel which means “One who contends with God.” God loves it when His people contend with Him.

And so this woman won’t take “no” for an answer.

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But here us Canadians have a hard time because we don’t understand the kind of contending she is doing. We know about fighting for our rights or the rights of someone else. And so there are all sorts of social justice movements rearing their heads these days – and it’s good to fight for justice – especially justice for the poor and powerless who can’t fight for themselves.

But that’s not what’s going on here. This woman isn’t fighting for her rights. She’s not saying she deserves what Jesus has. She’s not coming on the basis of her goodness or worthiness. She is coming to Jesus on the basis of His goodness and her unworthiness.

What she says is “I accept what you say about me. It’s true. I don’t deserve to be at Your table. But please give me what I don’t deserve.”

And Jesus is impressed and gives her what she asks for:

“Good answer!... “Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter.” (Mark 7:29)

You see this woman is the first person in Mark’s Gospel who understands the mystery of Jesus’ kingdom. She accepts who He is. She knows He has what she needs. And she accepts what He says about her. She’s not good. She is unclean.

And as such she enters His parable and grasps the gospel. And friends, the gospel is offensive. The gospel says you aren’t good. You don’t have your life in order. You aren’t acceptable to God. You are unclean. And compared to the holiness of God you are like a dog. Jesus’ gospel speaks these offensive words to all of us.

And the only people who get to come to God are those who embrace this. God has no patience for the self-righteous, and the put together. God only saves undeserving sinners who know that they are sinners.

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It's not an easy pill to swallow is it? But fortunately for us the story doesn't end there. Next Jesus encounters a deaf mute. And in verse 33 Jesus does a cryptic series of steps to heal him. We read:

Jesus led him away from the crowd so they could be alone. He put His fingers into the man's ears. Then, spitting on His own fingers, He touched the man's tongue. Looking up to heaven, He sighed and said, "*Ephphatha*," which means, "Be opened!" (Mark 7:33-34)

6 things. Now we know that Jesus doesn't need to do any of these things to heal – the woman's daughter got no hype or fanfare at all. So Jesus isn't putting on a show. He's not doing these moves because He needs to, He's doing them because the deaf mute needs them. Jesus is relating to him.

So Jesus knows the guy can't speak or hear, so He signs what He's going to do. It's sign language. He puts His fingers in his ears. And then He touches the man's tongue. And then He looks up to heaven. He's saying I'm going to heal this and I'm going to heal that.

And then He sighs, this is the most important part. The word "sigh" here can be translated "moan" which is how you mourn with someone when you feel their pain. Jesus is meeting this man where he is.

But why would Jesus mourn? I mean He knows He's going to heal this guy. Shouldn't He be laughing? Jesus doesn't think so. He mourns. It's like what happens when He heals Lazarus. Remember that story?

So Mary and Martha send word to Jesus "Your friend Lazarus is sick. Come heal him." But Jesus doesn't hurry – He takes His time. And then when He arrives Lazarus has been dead three days – not super sensitive Jesus!

And then when Jesus stands at the tomb He weeps. Jesus weeps just before He speaks the words "Lazarus come out." It doesn't seem to make any sense.

Doesn't Jesus know what He's going to do? Of course He does, but we miss it. Jesus mourns for two reasons. First, He mourns the brokenness of the sin-soaked world we live in – sickness and death was not the plan. "My world has been corrupted, and my prize creation is broken." Jesus mourns that.

But second Jesus also mourns knowing that every time He intervenes to reverse the curse - every time He does a miracle to return creation to the way it was designed to be - there is a cost. You see none of Jesus' miracles were free. They cost Him.

And Mark uses a very special word to point us in this direction. The word for deaf mute used in this passage only appears in one other place in scripture and that's in the Isaiah 35 prophecy about the Messiah. And this isn't an accident. Mark wants us to see this is who Jesus is. So in Isaiah 35 we read:

Say to those with anxious heart,  
 "Take courage, fear not.  
 Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance;  
 The retribution of God will come,  
 But He will save you."  
 Then the eyes of those who are blind will be opened,  
 And the ears of those who are deaf will be unstopped. (Isaiah 35:4-5 NASB)

And so Mark says "Look, the deaf hear and the mute speak, and it's because your God has come to you to save you. Jesus is the Messiah."

But that's not the whole prophecy. What about all that stuff about God coming with vengeance and retribution? How does that apply to Jesus? Jesus isn't attacking His enemies. Jesus doesn't take power. He gives it away. Jesus doesn't demand to be served. He came to serve. So where is the divine retribution Isaiah prophesied?

Well Jesus didn't come to bring divine retribution, He came to take it upon Himself. And this is why Jesus sighs or moans as He is about to heal. This is the cost of every bit of salvation that He brings. He must pay it Himself.

And this is the other half of the gospel. This is the good news part. You see Jesus doesn't just come telling us that we aren't worthy of His acceptance; that compared to the holiness of God we are dogs under the table. He also comes paying the penalty that we owe and receiving the punishment we deserve. And it's heavy – that's why Jesus sighs.

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Friends, at the cross Jesus would be beaten like a dog so that we, the dogs, could become children at the Father's table. He was made mute like a lamb before the shearers is silent, so that we could have a voice. And by His stripes we are saved.

And its when we see this that we too can come boldly to Jesus. We can know that as insulting as it is to be told by God "you are not good enough; you don't deserve anything good from Me." The good news of the gospel is that Jesus makes up where we fall short and takes on the divine retribution we ought to have received.

And it was His plan to do this from the very beginning. Redemption has always been "plan A." And redemption is plan A because this is the only way that sinners can come to God.

So friends, don't turn your nose up at the truth of your situation before God. Don't get offended when the Bible speaks the truth to you. Instead humble yourself like this woman and acknowledge your dependency on God's mercy. You need a Saviour.

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Two quick thoughts in closing. First, if the offense and the glory of the gospel is just making sense to you for the first time today; if today for the first time instead of being offended by Jesus telling you that you aren't good enough you are able to hear His words and accept them as true, then pray with me in a moment that Jesus would cover your brokenness with His blood, wash away your impurity, and clothe you in His righteousness. God wants to do this for you. Not because you deserve it or are good enough, but because He is good enough on your behalf.

Friend, Jesus went as far as to leave the comfort of heaven to take your place. He has walked in your shoes and born the burdens you carry. He understands you better than you understand yourself. And He loves you. Will you let Him win you with His love?

And second, if you are saved, then remember afresh that you haven't gotten where you are by your own merits. Everyone is saved by grace they don't deserve, or else they aren't saved at all.

So because you don't deserve what you've received, turn the grace you've received freely outward to the people around you. Give those who have wronged you what they don't deserve – forgive them. Open your life like a fire hydrant of grace and mercy.

The world we live in needs the presence of Jesus now as much as ever before – it's dark out there. And Jesus has deemed us to be the light of the world now. So let's let the mystery of His kingdom shine out through us. Let's surprize the world with His grace.