

Mark 7:24-37  
Sept 6, 2009

## South Plains

children of Israel), for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs (read 'Gentile dogs')." Was Jesus prejudiced against Gentiles?

### Was Jesus Prejudiced?

We're looking forward to a big potluck luncheon at South Plains on the last Sunday in this month when Union Grove Baptist Church visits us on September 27. There's always plenty of food, but we know from experience that some dishes are emptied in a hurry. Therefore, while we want to be polite, we do not want to be slow coming to the spread. Imagine for just a minute that everybody is lined up to start helping themselves to the bounty when somebody stands on the porch and says in a loud voice, "All the adults must wait outside. Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Whatever adults may think about feeding children first, I do not think any of us would appreciate being characterized as "dogs."

That last sentence, of course, is from the mouth of Jesus as he explains his hesitation to heal the daughter of a Gentile woman. Jesus has gone to the Gentile region of Tyre in order to escape from the Jewish crowds who have been peppering him with theological questions and with requests for miracles. Unfortunately, his reputation has preceded him, and a local woman begs him for a cure for her little girl who has an unclean spirit. The same Jesus who said, "Let the little ones come to me," now says, "Let the children be fed first (meaning the

Well, Jesus was certainly a man of his times. He grew up learning to speak in the language of Jews who believed themselves favored by God. That language is what made the parable of the good Samaritan, the good non-Jew, so revolutionary. Does using that language make Jesus a sinner? He was not a sinner whose stance toward his heavenly Father was rebellious, a scornful scoffer. Nor was he a person with a hateful attitude toward his neighbors. But, it is true that Jesus stood with sinners, sharing our limitations as a human being who spoke in the vernacular. He probably reflected the attitude of his clan who believed that his tribe, the tribe of Judah, was more important than other tribes; and that his nation was chosen above all others for a special mission by the Lord God Almighty.

In that sense, Jesus was human just as you and I are human. We are creatures of our time and place. Some attitudes and beliefs, some prejudices are like the water and we are like the fish who swim in that water. The more important question is this, What did Jesus do with his limitations?

Most of us would not want to live in Mexico or Russia or China, but we sure like to vacation there. Jesus vacationed in Gentile territory when he was worn out from answering the questions of the scribes and

Pharisees; when he suffered from compassion fatigue after dealing with the crowds; when he needed quiet time. He went to Tyre, “and did not want anyone to know he was there.” But, a mother with a sick child is desperate for help, even a Gentile mother. She has heard that Jesus of Nazareth can cast out demons. She doesn’t care that he’s on vacation. She’s begging for her daughter’s life. “If you want to call me a dog, go right ahead Jesus. But, ‘even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ How about a crumb of grace for my little girl?”

Whatever else this woman thinks about Jesus or about Jews in general, she believes he can help her. Her faith is quick and persistent and humble. It’s also rewarded. “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter,” responds the Lord. Jesus’ miracle seems an afterthought. The emphasis in this miracle story is on the fact that a Gentile has faith. Is it “desperate faith” that the Gospel of Mark is teaching us to imitate? A faith bold enough, needy enough to quarrel with the Lord and beg for a crumb?

As happens in so many places in the gospels, it is the outsider, the unconventional, the person we expect to be last in the kingdom who provides the example of faithfulness. I wonder what I would have done. So many of my prayers for healing are tentative and qualified as if I did not really believe that Jesus could heal. I’m afraid I sometimes give up too soon.

And I wonder if we in the church do not give up too soon on our unchurched neighbors, the modern day Gentiles who do not worship anywhere, whose behavior seems hostile to Christian morals, whose language represents the worst of the world. This story suggests to me that people who challenge our religion may be seeking answers, not just an argument. Jesus recognized a seeker in this Gentile.

The story does not stop in Tyre. Jesus turns around and heads for Galilee by way of an area called the Decapolis. He is still in Gentile territory when a deaf man with a speech impediment comes for healing. This time Mark describes the healing in great detail. “He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak,” says the watching crowd. Mark is almost quoting Isaiah 35:5-6. ...the ears of the deaf unstopped;... and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Jesus is the Messiah who brings salvation to the ends of the earth, including the Gentiles. He has stretched the boundaries of God’s mercy far beyond Israel and the Jews. A vacation journey that started as an escape from the religious wrangling of Galilee and Jerusalem has taken Jesus to places where the irreligious are ready for faith. It’s as if Jesus has accidentally backed into a mission to the ends of the earth.

But, there are no accidents in God’s world. There are only people alert to a God moment and people

oblivious to God. These Gentiles are not as oblivious to the movement of the Holy Spirit as the religious people have been. They have broken free of their prejudice against the Jews because they were willing to acknowledge their need for help, and willing to accept healing, even from a Jewish Jesus.

Last Saturday afternoon my neighbor stopped to talk for few minutes. He had watched the whole funeral of Ted Kennedy, including the President's eulogy. "I've gotten enough Jesus for today," he said. I don't know whether he was surprised by the presence of Jesus in church or by his presence alongside the "liberal lion of the senate." Jesus continues to show up in Gentile territory, even today. He is overturning our prejudices. By God's grace, he will expand the boundaries of the church to the ends of the earth.