

It was A.W. Tozer who once famously said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." I love that quote because what Tozer is getting at is that most of our life is downstream from what we think of God. Your conception of God, whether positive or negative, will give shape to how you live. We, as believers, are fundamentally making the assumption that to be human is to be created in the image of God and have eternity placed in our hearts. We are formed for that very purpose of knowing God, and what we think of God deeply shapes who we are.

As we jump back into the Gospel of Mark and continue to work through the life and teachings of Jesus, we are presented with this question again and again. "What do you think of Jesus?" It's the question that Mark has been posing and strategically and brilliantly writing through his gospel. Who is Jesus?

In some ways, he's asking the same question that Tozer asked. What comes to mind when you think of God? Where I want to push Tozer and where Mark is actually leading us more into is, "How then do we approach Jesus?" Not just who is Jesus, but then if we see Jesus for who he is and who Mark has laid out in the scriptures, it's also how do we then come to Jesus. How do we approach Jesus? And this text is going to provide a beautiful example, a powerful example of how we are to approach Jesus.

We see this example in the Syrophenician woman. There are three things we'll draw from her interaction with Jesus on how we not only address that question of who Jesus is but, even more so, how we go on to approach Jesus.

Turn in your Bible to [Mark 7:24-30](#). A little bit of context, one of the themes that's been coursing underneath the surface of Mark's gospel is this idea that Mark is provoking uncertainty within us by challenging our presumptions about who is in the Kingdom of God and who is outside the kingdom. We often encounter characters in the story whom we assume are the insiders—the religious leaders, elites, and disciples. They must be the ones on the inside, yet they constantly fail at understanding the message that Jesus is on about. And then often we run into these other characters that, at first glance, we assume they are the outsiders.

They're on the outside of this thing, and yet Mark portrays them, and Jesus encounters them in a way that suggests they are the insiders. Mark's gospel is written particularly for us as followers of Jesus and even more for those of you who, like me, have grown up in the Church, to cause us a little uncertainty. To provoke us to consider where am I on this? Mark and the way he's portrayed those inside and outside has demonstrated that those who are on the inside of the Kingdom of God

are not there on the basis of their external qualifications or of their own acumen.

If we've grown up in the Church, we can project that and assume things where Mark is saying it's much more about the holistic orientation towards God. It's where is your motivation, your affection, that internal longing is set on the way of Jesus because that is the barometer in which Jesus is inviting us into the Kingdom of God.

Think back to [Mark 4:11-12](#), Jesus is teaching that those who are "on the inside" of the kingdom are not those who just happen to hear things, but rather they understand. It's far more than just external acumen and external qualifications. Rather, it's where is your heart's disposition is. Are we currently aware of what is going on internally to where we can hear the message of the Kingdom of God and begin to understand it? And what's so beautiful is the disciples over and over fail to really understand, but you see them growing in this.

Through the Gospel of Mark, you see them wrestling in confusion, but they get to the place where they do begin to understand. The text for this message is going to present an example of a woman, who very much at first glance seems like she should be on the outside, but yet hears and perceives in a way that she might understand. So how do you approach Jesus? Who is Jesus to you? These are the questions we want to address this morning.

[Mark 7:24-30](#) Jesus entered a house and did not want anyone to know it yet, but he could not keep his presence a secret. The setting we have here is this place called Tyre, which is probably 40 miles north of Galilee, where Jesus spent the majority of his time. One of the things that Mark does so beautifully is constantly showing Jesus on the move. Mark is a fast-paced gospel.

We see in the previous seven chapters that Jesus has endured a lot of conflicts. Herod Antipas is out to kill him. The religious leaders are seeking to tear him down. He's been in all sorts of different conflicts, and from the best we can tell, the reason he's retreating to a different area is trying to get some respite. He's trying to slow the pace of life down.

But it says here that his fame has spread even beyond the region he was living in, and his presence couldn't be kept a secret. He still can't get away, even in a place like Tyre. The original audience of the Gospel of Mark would've perked their ears up if they heard he was in Tyre because it was enemy territory. The Jews and the Tyrians detested each other. They hated one another. This was not a cordial relationship. And even more so when it says that Jesus entered the home of someone there. I mean, this would've raised all sorts of red flags.

They would've asked questions. "Well, was it a Jew living in Tyre?" Because there were Jews living there. "Was it a Gentile?" It's Jesus entering into the very core intimate space with the enemy. So their ears would've perked up. Questions would've started to percolate.

[Mark 7:25-28](#) Mark now introduces this woman, and he uses the verb "heard." It says that "when she *heard* that Jesus was in that vicinity..." What I love is this is the same verb that was in Mark 4—they may be ever *hearing*. Mark is pointing out that this woman is hearing just like the disciples were trying to hear the call of Jesus. This woman hears that Jesus is around and her first inclination is to run that way because this woman, as we learn, is pretty broken. She has a little daughter who's been possessed by an impure spirit. She's demon possessed.

You can see the heartbreak of a woman like this as her daughter is experiencing something that she shouldn't experience. Her heart is breaking. She's feeling this cry to bring healing and wholeness back to her daughter. And so when she hears about Jesus, she runs towards him because her daughter has been possessed by an impure spirit. The problem with this scene is this woman had no rights and was transgressing all sorts of cultural standards by running to Jesus. She had no cultural reason to be in the presence of and approach a rabbi, particularly to enter the home and beg at the feet of this rabbi.

From what we can tell, there are four things against this woman. She wasn't Jewish. She was a Gentile. Gentiles shouldn't have associated with rabbis. Secondly, she was a woman. She's a woman in a male-dominated society. It would've been frowned upon that she would even approach a man in this public way.

Third, we see that the disciples are against her. You don't see that here in this text, but in Matthew's gospel, he tells the same exact story with a little bit more detail. [Matthew 15:23](#), we see the disciples telling Jesus to send her away because she was crying out to them. The reason the disciples wanted to dismiss her was they were exhausted. They wanted time away with Jesus. Then the crowds swarm and they're asking Jesus to get her out of there because she kept begging them. They wanted time with him. The disciples were against this woman.

And then the fourth reason is that she's Syrophenician. She's living in enemy territory and even more so, she's living with a daughter with an impure spirit. She's unclean. And so this woman had everything against her. She should not have been in the presence of this rabbi and certainly shouldn't have gone to him. She was unclean, and she was disqualified to be in the very presence of Jesus. This would've been a massive cultural issue.

So how then does Jesus respond to this? How does she come to Jesus? She believes that Jesus has this power and authority. That's why when she heard about Jesus, she ran to him to try to bring about healing.

Qualities of Approaching Jesus

Desperation

The first of three qualities that I want to draw from her example is that she is desperate. I mean, she's absolutely desperate. This is her first heart posture. She's coming to Jesus because she doesn't have any

other answer. Her heart's breaking for her daughter and her love for her family. She wants to see healing and wholeness. She herself is in pain and that desperation moves her towards Jesus.

We get a little more color on this story from Matthew's account where he fills in some more details. [Matthew 15:22](#) Notice that the woman says have mercy, not on her daughter, but on herself. You see, this woman is an empathetic mother. In many respects, I don't think it's hard for us to understand the posture in which she's coming. If you have loved ones as broken as this woman's daughter this desperation makes sense.

Of course, she would run to Jesus. She's desperate. "Have mercy on me," she cries out to Jesus because she's feeling the aches. She's a desperate mother, and she's willing to break all sorts of barriers and cultural boundaries because she'll do anything to get in the presence of Jesus. This is what a desperate presence does. It lays aside the pretensions. It lays aside all the facades, and it just says, "I need to be in the very presence of Jesus."

Are you desperate for Jesus? As we start this new year, is there a desperation in you like this woman, who recognizes that there are things beyond our ability to handle and we must run to Jesus? Are you desperate for Jesus?

Another place in the Bible that we see someone fall before the feet of Jesus is in the story of Jairus and the pain he was in as a parent. He fell before Jesus in prayer. We see it with the demoniac, the man possessed by the demons. He fell at the feet of Jesus. We see it here again with this woman begging in front of Jesus. "Jesus, have mercy on me." So the first posture in which we can learn from this woman on how to approach Jesus is desperation.

Persistence

The second is persistence. See this verb that is used when it says that she begs at the feet of Jesus. This word is in the present progressive tense. It's the idea that she begs and keeps on begging. It's this persistence in which you get this image that she's before Jesus, and she's not going to take no for an answer.

Jesus, have mercy on me. Have mercy on me. Have mercy on me. Her desperation is what fuels her persistence. She recognizes her deep need for Jesus and says, "I'm going to come to Jesus, and I'm going to come over and over and over to Jesus." It can be easy in times like this to run somewhere else, to pursue another source of healing. But what we find in this woman's faith is that she's running to Jesus, begging over and over, staying at the feet of Jesus, saying, "Jesus have mercy on me." She's desperate. She's persistent. She continues to lean into the presence of God.

Do you have that persistence when you go to Jesus? Do you continually go to Jesus? Do you continually bring these things before him? What's your posture? What are you bringing into the new year? What are the pain and the aches that you're carrying with you that don't magically disappear? When the calendar flips to 2023, has that welled up in you, a desperation to recognize that you need Jesus? Does it swell up in you? A persistence to say, I'm going to keep coming to Jesus even when it

doesn't make sense and it's hard. This woman is a beautiful example. We'll see the third one in a second.

Let's see how Jesus now responds to this. [Mark 7:27](#) This is Jesus speaking. She replied. [Mark 7:28](#) Now imagine the scene again. This woman, with a demon possessed daughter, bursts in the door uninvited and falls at the feet of Jesus. "Lord, have mercy on me. Have mercy. My daughter is suffering from an impure spirit. She's suffering terribly, have mercy on me." And Jesus' response is "First let the children have all they want. It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." I mean, it's a pretty crude response. It's not quite the answer any of us saw coming.

This little section here, [Mark 7:27-29](#), may be the most densely succinct picture of the gospel in all of the scripture. There is an incredible beauty to this exchange. But in order for us to understand that, I have to forewarn you; we have to get in the weeds a little bit. But Jesus' response provokes in this woman a brilliantly witty, stunningly humble response in her that is actually quite bold as well.

But let's dig in first with Jesus. He responds, "First, let the children eat all they want." He told her it wasn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs. Now we have to do a little work around this idea of children and the idea of dogs. Because at first glance, Jesus is calling this woman a dog. Like there are no two ways about it. And whether that's in the ancient world or even in the modern world, to call someone a dog, there's no way around calling that an insult. It's very much that. So what do we do with this?

Let's dig a little bit into these words because there's a play on words that you see in the Greek that doesn't quite come through in English, which, when we see it, will open up the beauty of this particular exchange.

In the Greek language, there are at least two words for dog. The first is the word *kuon*, a pejorative phrasing of dog. It's what in the eastern world would be universally despised. It is what we would've thought of as scavengers, the filthy, the impure, the dirty, the unclean dog. Anytime it's used in the New Testament, it's used in this derogatory sense. Think of [Matthew 7](#) when Jesus is teaching. He says not to give what is holy to dogs or pearls before swine. Or in [Philippians 3](#) where Paul's talking and he's speaking of those false teachers, and he says to watch out for those dogs. It's used in this negative sense. The word *kuon* for dog here is universally a negative term.

Even beyond that, culturally, it was a word that the Jewish people would've used to degrade those who were non-Jews. They would've called them a dog, savages. It was meant to have that sharp edge. But what's fascinating is there's another word in Greek for dog, and it's the word that Jesus uses here in this exchange, and it's the word *kunarium*. It means little dog. It means house pet.

The best translation is quite literally puppies. And Jesus uses it here in this exchange. It's the only place in the entire New Testament where this word, in particular, is used, and Jesus uses this word when speaking to the woman. He doesn't use the derogatory term, but rather uses this term puppy or puppies. There's a sense in which this word is a

diminutive of that harsher word for dog, but Jesus' response here is a way in which he recognizes the woman is not a Jew, not a child of God.

He's playing off that, and he's saying she is an outsider. She is one of the puppies. But he's doing it in a way that isn't the slang derogatory term but is saying her identity is outside of what the traditional story had been. God had chosen the people of Israel, and that was the way in which the message in the Kingdom of God was going to come to all the nations.

He says, but you're on the outside of that. And then he used this other phrase where he talks about children. And this, again, we're in the weeds here, but follow with me when he says, for it's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the *kunarium* or the house dog, the puppies. The word for children here is the Greek word *teknon*. And *teknon* means child or descendant. It's a blood descendant, someone who's directly related to that line. And here, Jesus uses that. He says a *teknon*.

Now this word *teknon* is also really important throughout the scriptures because it links it in with the story of Israel. Again, throughout the Old Testament, God had chosen a particular people that he was going to bless, Israel. And through Israel, they would bless all the nations. So the scope of God's redemptive movement was always for all the nations, for the entirety of the world. But it was going to happen through the Jewish people, the Israelites.

Jesus is saying here to let the children eat all they want first. He's saying the story's always been that it was going to go through Israel first, and then it was going to go to the world. He's looking at this woman and saying, "Listen, I can't give to you first without having ordered the plan that God had initiated, that it goes through the Jews first and then to the others. I can't allow the puppies, those on the outside, to eat before the children, and he's speaking a metaphor that we can all relate to. None of us would go out of our way to feed our house pets before we'd feed our actual children. In the same way that a family meal is organized this way, so too, God's movement is first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. There's always been that broad scope, but this is the order in which it's played out.

Now here's the brilliance. We see Jesus using the word *kunarium*, the puppies, talking about the *teknon*, the children, the descendants, and the Israelites, and then look in [verse 28](#). She's playing off the same two word plays that Jesus had. The word that she uses here for dogs is puppies, she understood the *teknon* need to eat first and then the little puppies, but they eat second, even though the little puppies eat from the crumbs that fall from the children, she doesn't use the word *teknon* for children. She uses the Greek word *paidion*, which is like a little child, little one, or infant. She's mirroring; she's saying, "Yes, the *teknon* have their place, she says, but even the puppies, they still get to eat, but they eat from the little ones."

It's like she's saying that the little dogs eat from the little humans, and it's this beautiful exchange where he says, "Yes, Jesus, I understand I'm not a *teknon*, but I'm still a child, and even the little puppies, those on the outside, they still eat what the little ones drop, the crumbs that fall from the table." She understands the stories that all people will be able

to eat. But she needed hers now. She's asking if she could eat those crumbs now. Would Jesus still extend that grace to her now? Jesus is actually floored by her response.

Humility

We'll see that in verse 29 in a second because she boldly comes before through desperation and persistence, but also in humility. She accepts her position and says she is not worthy on her own. Jesus was right. She knows she is disqualified, unclean, and impure. She knew she didn't have the external qualifications. "I'm not the one who is a part of God's set family in Israel, which was the original plan. I'm none of those things." But notice that she doesn't respond defensively. She accepts her posture. She accepts her less than this, her unqualified nature. And she says, "Jesus, but would you still feed me?"

Because she's coming to Jesus, not on her own qualifications, but she's appealing to the very love and affection of Jesus and God themselves. It is beautifully humble. She is saying, "First, let the children, the *teknon*, eat all they want. I understand. I accept the inability of me to come by any other circumstances than your grace and your love."

And what's beautiful is that when she begins verse 28 by saying "Lord," she's the first and the only character in the entire Gospel of Mark that will address Jesus rightfully as Lord. The disciples don't do it. The religious leaders don't get it. The Romans don't get it. Mark brilliantly adds this detail because this woman gets it.

She is answering the question of who is Jesus. Jesus is Lord. She names Jesus and says, "Lord, I know I'm not worthy, but your love is sufficient." She said that his grace was enough to extend even to the puppies, even to the little ones, to the little children. We still get to eat the crumbs. She asked Jesus to give her some crumbs because she was desperate.

You see this third characteristic that we can learn from this woman that she displays so beautifully is she is incredibly humble. She has this humility about her. She recognizes that she is a Gentile, a woman, and impure, and rather than standing on her right, saying she has the right to do this. Instead of her demanding what Jesus offers, she simply embraces her inability. She recognizes, in humility, her position in the story, and she asks Jesus for the scraps. It is an incredibly beautiful example of what it means to come humbly before Jesus and say, "Jesus, I know I can't, but you can." The New Testament scholar Tim Gombis talks about her response.

By her response, she presents herself most humbly before Jesus. She has the most cultivated heart of any character in this larger section of Mark 8:21. She's not offended at Jesus' dismissive remark but rather adopts a posture of humility as one who is happy to receive a few table scraps, and she is the only person in Mark's gospel who addresses him as Lord. Tim Gombis

She's so humble that she willingly accepts her position and says, "Just a few scraps, Jesus, from your table would be enough. Would you give me those scraps?" She doesn't fight. She doesn't get defensive. She doesn't raise her fist in anger. She embraces her humility.

Church, do you come humbly to God? Do you come with that posture, or do you come with this sense of "God, you owe me." Because the harsh reality that this text presents and the harsh reality of what we know about God is that he owes you nothing. He does not owe you a thing, but he graciously meets us, and he's a good God. He offers us himself.

If I were to boil everything that I want you to take away from this morning, it's that we come to Jesus not on the basis of our own worthiness but on the basis of his. She was not worthy, but he is. He is worthy of making the call to meet this woman, to heal this woman's child, and to bring about salvation and healing to this broken situation. And so we come again to Jesus, not on the basis of our own worthiness, but on the basis of his. And it's through her desperation, her persistence, and her humility that we learn about a new posture in which we come before God.

Because look down at [verses 29-30](#). Some translations say something like, "what an answer" instead of "for such a reply." I mean, Jesus was floored. This is one of the few instances where you almost get the sense that, rhetorically, Jesus was defeated by this woman. Or her response was so sharp, so bold, so brilliant, so humble, so witty that Jesus was floored and said, "Man, what an answer. What a response." Because she got it, she heard and was able to perceive what was going on. She heard the message of the kingdom and understood Jesus. Floored by this, he says, "Yes, I will cast that demon out." He sends her home, and when she gets there, she sees her child lying in bed and the demon gone.

In many ways, this exchange is another parable of Jesus. It's short and dense, but it's one parable, and this woman is the first one who hears. I mean, think of all the disciples that had heard these parables and couldn't understand. This woman hears a parable and understands. It goes back to this posture of being desperate, persistent, and humble.

To close, I want to talk about one more thing regarding this woman. There are two ways in which we can reject the gospel. This message is that we are unworthy but must come to Jesus only on the position of his worthiness. And you see both at play that she rejects. See the first is that you can come to Jesus with a superiority complex that says, "I don't need Jesus. I'll be fine on my own." And it's in that pride that we reject the very work of Jesus, thinking we can do that work on our own.

This woman could have come to Jesus and said, "Jesus, why haven't you done anything? I'll just do it myself. I don't need you." And she could have tried, but her desperate state and her persistence testify to the fact that she couldn't. So you can come to Jesus thinking you have it, you're superior, and you're fine. It's a lack of humility. It's arrogance.

But the other way in which we can reject the gospel is through an inferiority complex. And this woman doesn't descend into that either. You can reject Jesus by believing that you are too lowly to even be loved by him, which is a self-centered response as well. That's actually built on pride and self-centeredness in which you say, "I'm too bad for Jesus, and Jesus could never love me." It actually diminishes the power and the ability of Jesus to love you. So in that inferiority complex, we actually can degrade the very power and love of Jesus. And this woman doesn't descend into

that either. She knows that she was lowly, and didn't belong, but she still came to him. She was still persistent in that she embraced her posture. She doesn't devolve into despair, into a nihilism that says, nothing can happen. Nothing's good.

Rather in humility, she understands her lowly state and believes in Jesus still, and moves towards him. Here's the thing with humility. It is not thinking so lowly of yourself that there's nothing to be loved. Humility is understanding your position in the created order properly. It's understanding you are not God. It's understanding your sinful state. It's understanding that you can't do it on your own. But it's also understanding that Jesus can. It's understanding that we come to Jesus not on our own worthiness but on his. And so we can succumb to a superiority complex, or we can succumb to an inferiority complex.

The reality and the beautiful example we see in this woman is that God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud. This woman, with the posture of desperation, persistence, and humility understands this.

Desperation is understanding our need for Jesus. Do you recognize your need for Jesus? Persistence is understanding our ability to seek Jesus' mercy. You have the ability to pursue his mercy. Do you believe that, or do you think so lowly of yourself that you can't come to Jesus in that persistence where she was begging Jesus over and over again? And lastly, humility is the overall posture of a follower of Jesus that understands their place in the created order. That says, "I am not God, but I'm not so lowly that God would not at least entertain a dialogue with me."

Humility is the fundamental posture of the follower of Jesus that recognizes their need for God, their need for Jesus, and their inability to do it on their own, but also recognizes the power and authority of the love of Jesus towards humanity.

Just where are you at on that? Do you have a proper view of yourself? Do you have a proper view that we come to Jesus? Not on the basis of her own worthiness but on his? Does that come to mind when you think of Jesus? Using the Tozer quote, we said that the thing that comes to mind when you think of God is the most important thing about you. And I just want to ask what would it look like this year to begin with that posture that recognizes our need to be desperate, persistent, and humble before God. And if that is what comes to mind when you think of God, you're on the right track. Do you see the affection of God as you look like this woman does?

Thomas Cranmer, who beautifully compiled and wrote the book of common prayer that the Church has used for hundreds of years wrote these beautiful written prayers and liturgies for when we come before God. He has this great prayer in there that's built off of this particular scene. As he was envisioning this exchange between the Syrophoenician woman and Jesus, he wrote this stunningly beautiful prayer that's been

prayed by millions of people throughout the ages of the Church. To close, I just want us to offer this as a prayer in reflection of that. May we take this prayer into the new year.

Lord, we do not presume to come to this your table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your abundant and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord, whose character is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen. Thomas Cranmer

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2023 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1469-19FC