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# Who’s on the outside looking in?

# Mark 7:24-30?

Of all the encounters Jesus has in the Gospel of Mark, this is probably the most challenging and disturbing. The American scholar Tim Gombis sums up the situation well, observing that Jesus ‘speaks with such apparent rudeness to this poor woman, insulting her and treating her in such degrading fashion, that interpreters are left befuddled. This simply does not seem like the gracious and compassionate Jesus, the one who is meek and mild, tender and kind.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Just like last week’s reading, the Feeding of the 5,000, this incident begins with Jesus escaping to a location that might offer relief from the attention of the crowds who follow him. He has gone to Tyre, now part of southern Lebanon, a surprising location given the historic tensions between Jews and Tyrians. Prophets like Isaiah (23) and Ezekiel (26:1-28:19) proclaimed judgement on Tyre while the first-century Jewish historian Josephus described Tyrians as ‘notoriously our bitterest enemies.’

No respectable, first-century Jewish man would have reacted favourably to the woman Jesus meets. She lives in Tyre but is actually Greek: a gentile, a woman and the mother of a demon-possessed child, she would have been considered unclean on multiple levels. Even bearing this in mind, however, it is hard to read the blunt reply of Jesus when she asks for healing for her daughter: what’s meant for the children will not be given to the dogs.

Demonstrating considerable tenacity, the woman is undeterred. Her words but not her tone of voice are recorded by Mark. We can’t tell, therefore, if her reply is plaintive or edgy, but her wit is admirable and her logic proves irresistible to Jesus: ‘Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’

This is a remarkable scene. The Syro-Phoenician woman is the only figure in the gospels who seems able to outwit Jesus, and also the only figure in Mark’s Gospel to address him as Lord. When he speaks of his healing of her daughter, he links it directly to her tenacious and clever riposte. ‘For such a reply…’

Another writer, Ched Myers, suggests that Jesus’ willingness to allow this woman to get the better of him is a powerful example of changed relationships within the kingdom of God: ‘This drama represents another example of status-equalisation. Jesus allowed himself to be “shamed” (becoming “least”) in order to include this pagan woman in the new community of the kingdom; so too Judaism will have to suffer the indignity of redefining its group boundaries… in order to realise that gentiles are now welcomed as equals.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

**For discussion**

1. This is one of the most puzzling incidents in Mark’s Gospel. How do you respond to the idea that Jesus seems so rude and uses what could be described as a term of prejudice against the Syro-Phoenician woman?
2. As noted above, the Syro-Phoenician woman stands out in Mark, the only person in the whole book who addresses Jesus as Lord. In what ways can she be considered a role model for people of faith?
3. On Sunday, Trevor spoke about how Jesus often seems to be disturbed by others. How does that aspect of his ministry make you think differently about your own priorities and how you plan your life?
4. How does this passage deepen your understanding of what it might mean for SBC to be ‘a kingdom church: demonstrating God’s kingdom here on earth through being a diverse people, welcoming all and challenging injustice’?

1. Tim Gombis, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Mark*, Zondervan, 2021, p253 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man,* Orbis, 1988, p204 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)