

# Home Study

## Mark's Epiphany



FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2021

### INTRODUCTION

Today in America, racial tensions are apparent. Although much progress has been made since the not-too-long ago days of slavery and segregation, racial prejudice still exists in many ways.

But what about in Jesus' day? Did racial and cultural tensions exist 2000 years ago? Undoubtedly. In today's passage, Jesus makes a comment that certainly would not be considered "politically correct" today. What did Jesus mean by this? Is this proof that Jesus was actually a sinful, racist human, and not the sinless Son of God? Or is Mark giving us a deeper, richer picture of Christ's divinity in this Gospel story? Let's find out.

### TODAY'S READING

Open your Bible to Mark's Gospel. Read Mark 5:7:24-30. As you're reading this story, you may be surprised, or puzzled, by certain things. Make a note of these as you read.

We start with Jesus entering a house, hoping for some privacy. However, at this point his popularity is so widespread that he can't stay hidden long.

Maybe you can relate -- not to the celebrity and popularity, but to the desire for peace and quiet that often elude us in today's fast-paced culture. Have you ever come home from a long day of work or errands, wanting nothing more than to collapse in bed, but instead you find yourself thrown into the middle of family commotion? How did you respond?

Usually we respond out of annoyance or frustration, or maybe with a request to be left alone. In today's reading, Jesus responds with compassion. He lovingly sets aside his own desire for the sake of helping a woman in need and teaching an important lesson to his followers both then and now.

The woman in question is a Greek, a Gentile. She is not Jewish, and therefore is considered by the Jews to be unclean and unworthy. Despite this presupposed racial prejudice, she approaches Jesus and falls down at his feet, begging him to cast a demon out of her daughter.

Read verse 27 again. Jesus responds in an unexpected way (or perhaps expected for a Jewish audience at that time).

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What's your first reaction to that statement? Surprise? Anger? Indignation? Jesus appears to be reinforcing the racial stereotype of his day that the Jewish people were God's special children and all other people were nothing more than "dogs." Yikes!

Thankfully the interaction that follows paints a different picture and begins to hint at the incredible shift that took place shortly after Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Read verse 28 again. Rather than responding to Jesus' comment with outrage, the woman responds with great humility and faith. She doesn't deny that she is unworthy of God's love, but instead she begs for even the "crumbs" of God's mercy.

What do you think of her answer? What do her words say about her main concern at this moment? Do her words express faith and trust in Jesus, or do they express suspicion and resentment?

Now read again verses 29-30. Jesus is impressed with the woman's answer, and he obligingly tells her that the demon has left her daughter.

Read Matthew's parallel account of this story, in Matthew 15:21-28. In this account, Jesus even remarks "Woman, you have great faith!" He offers extremely high praise to this person. Compare her faith with the inconsistent, wavering, sputtering faith of the twelve disciples, in the stories we've read so far in Mark's Gospel!

How do you think we can learn and live out her example in our Christian walk? Do you ever feel entitled to receive certain things from God?

So how should we understand and learn from Jesus' interaction with the woman? There are several details to keep in mind.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus tells us that his ministry is first for the Jewish people - but the clear, revealed intent of God is that those who believe will expand the mission beyond the confines of this one ethnic group to the very ends of the earth. Jesus came first to the Jews, but he had no intention of coming only to Jews. His ministry would set in motion a spiritual movement that would change the course of human history for all people. Not to mention his atoning sacrifice on the cross would extend to cover the sins of the entire world. We are saved by grace, not by race.

But still, why the harsh language employed by Jesus in verse 27 of today's reading?

One possibility is that Jesus used this moment as a test. His harsh words were a test to the woman to reveal the extent of her faith and humility. She passed the test with flying colors.

Another possibility is that Jesus was using this situation as a teaching moment for his disciples. Of course Jesus knew her heart already, but perhaps his test exposed her incredible faith to the disciples around him. They may have still suffered from racial prejudice despite walking alongside

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Jesus and seeing his compassionate interactions with Samaritans and Gentiles. By first speaking into their prejudices and then subverting them, Jesus continued to reveal to them that his kingdom was not limited to Jewish people only. In fact, they may have been stunned and humbled themselves by recognizing that this outsider woman's faith was greater than their own. This story in Mark points us forward to the incredible religious shift that would take place shortly after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Namely, the full realization that salvation is not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles, also (a.k.a., everyone – read Romans 1:16)!

Of course, this was God's plan all along. Read also Isaiah 49:6, and Psalm 67. But God's vision of salvation for all people is often lost by sinful people like ourselves along the way.

Who are some people towards whom you have a hard time extending God's grace?

What are some characteristics in people that you tend to judge and criticize harshly? Race? Culture? Attitude? Clothing? Appearance? Other?

How can God's Word help transform your mindset when it comes to reaching those people with the Gospel? How does God view those people? How does God view you?

### **PRAYER**

Dear Lord, thank you for revealing your love and salvation to all people through your death on the cross. Help expose my/our prejudices and teach me/us to extend your grace to all people. Thank you for feeding me/us the crumbs of the bread of life through your Word. We are mere dogs, unworthy of your mercy, but I/we beg that you extend it to me/us on account of your goodness. Nourish me/us, and transform me/us, so that I/we can serve you more fully. Amen.