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Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23  
James 2:1-10, 14-17  
Mark 7:24-37

“WWJD”. What Would Jesus Do? It is an abbreviation and slogan that appeared in Christian youth movements in the 1990s, and has been captured on posters, bookmarks, and plastic wrist-bands ever since. The slogan is not a bad guide to life as we seek to emulate our master.

But what happens when we find that Jesus did something that we struggle with? What do we do with the fact that Jesus makes a remark to the woman from Syrian Phoenicia that is discriminatory and offensive? He refers to her people as “dogs”! What do we do?

Do we use this as license for discrimination ourselves? Jesus did it, so it must be okay?

Or do we try to explain it away; try to reduce the offence? No, Jesus didn’t really do it, because it is not what it seems on the surface?

The latter response is a little better than the first, because it recognises the limitations of an ethic built around the slogan on its own. The issue is that we cannot simply read off the surface of the Gospels about what Jesus did, and assume that we must do exactly the same. What Jesus did was done within a particular context: the context of time, place, and culture; and most importantly, the context of that particular age in God’s dealings with humankind. In effect, before we can answer “What would Jesus do?”, and whether we should do the same, we need understand WJDI, “Why Jesus Did It”.

Various ways out of the apparent offensiveness of Jesus’ words have been suggested by different commentators.

Is the offense reduced when we notice that the Greek word “dogs” is in the diminutive form, suggesting puppies or domesticated dogs, rather than wild scavengers? I’m not sure that really helps us: whether “puppy” or “dog”, the implication and offence is still clear; it is still a pretty obnoxious thing to call a

desperate mum who's come seeking your help.<sup>1</sup>

Is the offense reduced if we imagine that Jesus is wanting to test the woman's faith? But the problem is that nowhere in the text does this passage indicate that this is a test. And in any case, the woman has already exhibited great faith in coming to Jesus in the first place, bowing at his feet, and beseeching him for the healing that, clearly, she believes he can give.<sup>2</sup>

Is the offense reduced if we believe that Jesus needed the woman's response to stretch his vision of his mission?<sup>3</sup> There may be something in this, but I believe we need to be careful not ignore the fact that Jesus would have understood the ancient calling of his people to be a light to the Gentiles; and we need to recall that Jesus had already cast out a legion of unclean spirits in the thoroughly non-Jewish territory of the Gerasenes.<sup>4</sup>

I do find myself wondering how much of the effort to explain away the offence derives from our own needs to see Jesus in a particular way. We seem to want a Jesus who is innocuous, unchallenging, unthreatening, responsive to our every need in the way we want.

We have to admit that there is a lot about this event that we don't know. We don't know Jesus' tone of voice as he made this remark. We don't know his body language. We don't know what Jesus knew already of the woman's disposition and faith. We don't know what Jesus would have done if the woman had gone off disappointed and offended.

What we do know is that both Matthew and Mark included this event when they put their Gospel accounts together. Despite the offence, these two apostles felt this event was important enough to include. So we do well to ask what this event says as part of the overall sweep of Mark's Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Lose, "Dogs and the Kingdom of God"

<sup>2</sup> Lose, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See Lose, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See Wright, *Mark*, p.55.

Immediately before the present passage, Jesus has provided a fresh view of cleanness and uncleanness.<sup>5</sup> As he set that out he subtly undermined the protective fence that first-century Jews maintained around their own identity. And now here we find him confronted with a situation in which an unclean spirit is involved, and in which ministry to this Gentile would imply a radical breaching of that protective fence.

Rather than being a test of the woman, Jesus responds in a way that sets up a test or challenge to Jesus' compatriots, to those looking on, or those who might come to hear of the event – including us.

I wonder whether Jesus, recognising his own privileged position in this encounter, has dialled things up by saying what his compatriots likely think but might be too embarrassed to say out loud. Jesus wants to expose the exclusivity of his fellow Jews: "I know you think Gentiles are dogs and you want me to treat them as such. But – pay attention – this is where your biases lead. Are you comfortable with this scene?"<sup>6</sup>

Context matters, such as the placement of this event after the clean/unclean discussion. Another part of context is to understand what time we're in. Here we're reading of the ministry of Jesus, of things that happened before his crucifixion and resurrection, and before the outpouring of the Spirit upon the infant church at Pentecost. Jesus' personal vocation was not to spread the gospel to the Gentile world, but to tell the Jewish people themselves that their long-awaited deliverance was at hand; and his vocation was to bring that deliverance about through his dying and rising in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> Of course it didn't stop there: consistent with the ancient prophecies and the calling of his people from the beginning, Jesus believed that if and when Israel was redeemed, then that would be the time for the rest of the world to be brought under the saving and judging rule of God, the world's creator. So for Jesus, the Gentiles would be brought in soon enough; for the moment it was vital that he not be distracted from his primary task. He had come north, out of Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 7:1-23. See Wright, *Mark*, 94-95

<sup>6</sup> Bailey, *Jesus*, p.224. Note Bailey's remarks are based around the parallel passage in Matthew.

<sup>7</sup> This paragraph and onwards, Wright, *Mark*, p.95-96, with some amendment and additions

territory, not to preach and heal but to lie low for a while after doing and saying some quite risky things.

Jesus isn't, then, denying that Gentiles have a claim on the love and mercy of the one true God. He is perhaps careful not to be drawn away to an extension of his work into other areas, which would divert him from the difficult and dangerous tasks to which he was called. Publicity in Tyre (some distance up the coast from Galilee) would have sent all the wrong signals; Jesus' work wasn't primarily that of an itinerant medical missionary, but that of inaugurating God's kingdom.

Jesus wasn't simply called to go around being helpful to everyone. He had specific (and controversial) things to do and a limited time to do them. If we remake Jesus in the cosy image of a universal problem-solver, we will miss the huge importance of his unique assignment. Jesus must not be distracted from the messianic vocation that will lead him to the cross.

In the same way, we, readers of the gospel and followers of Jesus, must not be distracted from our true vocation which is to faithfully bear the fullness of the gospel to the world.

Despite all this, the daughter of the Gentile woman does in fact get healed. It is a sign that Jesus meant what he said about cleanness and uncleanness. In Jesus, the old barriers, the old protective fences, were being swept away: he crossed barriers of race, religion, sex, and tradition as he addressed this woman's plea.<sup>8</sup> In Jesus the dogs under the table were already getting to share in the children's bread; and pretty soon, in the light of the resurrection, they would cease to be dogs and would become children alongside the others. We do well to remember that we too should be breaking down barriers between people – barriers are just as real and prevalent today. And we do so as an expression of God's worldwide work, seeking to draw all humanity into the family of God.

In addition to my wondering about what our response to this passage says about ourselves, I have something of the same kind of wondering about our response to

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<sup>8</sup> English, *Mark*, p.150; See also Bailey, *Jesus*, p.219

James writing about favouritism. I find it interesting that we undertake or allow positive discrimination in some situations without hesitation or question: we carry an infant who is unable to walk; we help up one who has fallen over; we provide a pension for the elderly; we provide a primary education for the young; we speak more slowly and clearly for someone who is hard of hearing; we provide support services for people living with disability or chronic ill-health; and so on. We allow positive discrimination in some situations, but seem to end up in major debates about it in other situations, asserting that democracy and fairness demand that all be treated equally. I wonder if the variation in our approach is truly a matter of principle, or is really more about which side we find ourselves on and whether we feel our own position is under threat.

When James says that there is to be no favouritism, he is talking about favouritism being shown towards those who already have much – status, wealth, privilege. He is not talking about positive discrimination shown towards those who have little. In the perennial struggle for social justice, in which the scales seem always to be tipped on the side of the wealthy and powerful, God evens the balance by taking the side of the poor and defenceless.<sup>9</sup> And this is made abundantly clear in today's pithy statements from Proverbs.<sup>10</sup>

Our response to Jesus' answer to the Syrophenician woman says a great deal about us. What I find especially significant is what her response says about her. In answering "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" she remarkably accepts the position her Gentile race places her in within the understanding of the Jewish man she approaches for help: she has no claim on him, no right to demand or expect his help. There is a remarkable humility here. In the same way, we come before Jesus with no right to his mercy and saving power: these are the pure gift of God's grace alone.

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<sup>9</sup> Marshall, *Justice*, pp.38-42 (Italics in original)

<sup>10</sup> See discussion in Strollo "Commentary on Proverbs"

We cannot see Jesus' words in isolation. The same Jesus who apparently labels this woman a dog, goes on to identify wholly with all the lowly, all the outcasts, all the humiliated, with all the undeserving ... with us! He moves from his place of privilege, to the lowliest place imaginable in order that we might be raised up.

We are that Syrophenician woman, once excluded, once in need of salvation, now brought near into the restoring love of Christ.

We do well to remember that with gratitude, as we worship him and as we regard others.

When we consider what to do, as we ask "What would Jesus do", let us remember what Jesus in fact *did*, suffering with and for the Syrophenician woman and for us all.

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