

Meet Jesus: As he's greeted by true religion

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[0 : 00] Amen. So we're continuing our series from Mark's Gospel. We're in Mark chapter 7 and we'll be reading from verse 24. It's on page 843.

Mark chapter 7 from verse 24. And from there Jesus arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know. Yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.

Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.

But she answered him, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. And he said to her, For this statement you may go your way.

[1 : 13] The demon has left your daughter. And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. We've got two points.

And our first point is Jesus rejects external religion. You might just remember the beginning of this passage.

Let's just look there, the beginning of verse 24. And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He arose and went away.

And straight away, we're sort of thinking back, aren't we, to the previous incident that we were looking at last week. Jesus is leaving the area of Galilee and the Pharisees.

Mark's sort of saying to us, He turned his back on them. You might remember what we noticed a couple of weeks ago. It started, didn't it, with Jesus' whirlwind tour.

[2 : 12] Do you remember? Shall we just look at chapter 6, verse 56? And wherever he came in villages, cities, or countryside, they lay the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment.

And as many as touched it were made well. And so Jesus has this ministry, doesn't he, in that region. And it's as if Mark's saying to us in that verse 56 that there was a lot of contact going on with Jesus in the marketplaces.

And then we come to that incident, don't we, with the Pharisees. You'd expect them to be rejoicing, wouldn't you, really? You know, Jesus alleviating sickness could be the promised Messiah from the Old Testament.

You'd expect them to be thinking those sorts of things, wouldn't you? But what do they do? Chapter 7, verses 1 and 2, they notice the trivia of their oral law.

Now, when the Pharisees gathered to him with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

[3 : 30] And so Jesus takes them to task. He shows them that they themselves are breaking God's law. Verse 8, You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men, says Jesus.

And then, after destroying their pretense at righteousness, Jesus demolishes their man-made religion.

He starts looking at the human condition in this passage, which is really the problem in Glasgow. It's a problem in London. It's a problem, friends, in the whole of the world.

And it's not gun crime. It's not that there's not enough police on the streets. It's the problem of the human heart. That's where it all begins. That's where it all wells up from.

This is the real diagnosis, friends, of your heart. Chapter 7, verses 20 to 22. Jesus lists, doesn't he, the things that well up from within.

[4 : 32] And then verse 23, he gives his verdict like a high court judge. Did you see that? Chapter 7, verse 23. All these things come from where? From within. And they defile a person.

And so, friends, just think this one through. Think about this. The problem of the human heart. That is our inner self. It's universal, isn't it? All humankind.

Do you see? It's a universal problem. And so, think through the logic of this. If there's a solution in Jesus Christ, it means that the solution is therefore universal, potentially, isn't it?

Do you see? And so, Mark begins his gospel, doesn't he? Chapter 1, verse 1. The good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is good news.

Jesus has come with a solution for our biggest problem. And here's the religious consequences of this. We're looking at these in our passage.

[5 : 36] Think about it. The Jew-Gentile distinction is dissolving before our very eyes. You know, being righteous is more about the human condition, more about our hearts than religious practice.

And so, that was our first point. Jesus rejects external religion. And Jesus explained in that passage why external religion can't penetrate, can't deal with the problem of our hearts.

You know, our inner selves. And our second point is that Jesus encounters the religion of the heart. So, having rebuked these Pharisees here and diagnosed the human condition, Jesus is on his way. He walks away from them. Do you remember verse 24, the beginning? And shock, he walks into Gentile country, Gentile territory. Everything is sort of being ratcheted up.

Apparently, Tyre and Sidon, well, that was a region near the coast of the Mediterranean. And Greeks had settled there following the invasion from Alexander the Great about 360 years previously.

[7 : 01] So, it was a Greek region. They spoke the Greek language around there. So, Jesus marches straight into Gentile territory. What's he doing? And we look at our Old Testaments, don't we?

And God said through Abraham that all peoples, Genesis chapter 12, will be blessed through you. Could it be? Could it be? You know, could it be that Jesus is picking up the baton of the Old Testament here and he's on a mission?

It's a prelude to the church's mission. Verse 24, the end of it. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.

Perhaps he needed a few days rest. You know, keep a low profile for a few days with his disciples. But this isn't Tony Blair flying out to the Caribbean somewhere to use the house of Cliff Richard. Something like that. It's not that. No, this is someone who claims to be God. Who has control over nature. Who can cast out evil. Who can heal.

[8 : 11] Who can even bring people back from the dead. He teaches with the authority of God. You know, it's like he's a conductor and the whole of creation is his orchestra.

Do you see? And what's more, he's accessible. You know, he's within walking distance. There's no security gates. No limousines with black windows.

No strange men with sunglasses and dark suits on and communication devices in their ear. Nothing like that. Jesus is accessible, isn't he?

So this woman, well, she gets to him, doesn't she? And she's the sort of woman who would. Verses 25 and 26. Have a look with me there. But immediately a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.

Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. So let's just think here, friends, about this woman.

[9 : 16] Think about this woman here in front of Jesus. What's her motivation? What's driving her? You know, she's got no time for tradition, has she? She's like a bull in a china shop.

Well, we ask her, you know, we say, why are you approaching Jesus in this manner? And she says, it's my daughter, stupid.

Doesn't she? She's got a little daughter back home. And her love knows no limits. It's brought her to Jesus. Do you see?

Brought her crashing onto the scene, breaking through all sorts of barriers. And friends, whenever, whenever people combine an appreciation of their need and an understanding of Jesus Christ, well, there's a rendezvous on the cards, isn't there?

And that's what's happening here. You know, perhaps that's happening with us today, this lunchtime. Someone's coming to meet Jesus Christ through his word. You can feel that rendezvous

taking place.

[10:25] You know, perhaps your impression of religion had kept you away from the church in the past. But today, Jesus is demolishing boundaries to meet you.

So, this woman, she's shocking everybody, isn't she? Mark's gospel must have been so shocking when people sat down in the first century to read it.

You can imagine some young man has sort of got a copy of the parchment of Mark's gospel. He's so excited with it. He can't wait to take it to the synagogue on Saturday morning.

He can hardly sleep. And then Saturday morning comes along. He goes along to the synagogue.

And then that point comes in the service. One of the elders says, has anybody got a word?

And this man gets up. His knees are shaking. And he starts to read Mark's gospel. And there's uproar. She, they say, mouths open, they're shocked.

[11:29] She just bursts in, they say. She's invaded his previous privacy. She's a Greek, an outsider. And it's not only that, it's her daughter.

Her daughter is also Greek and she's got an evil spirit. That's double uncleanness. And just look at the mother there, begging at Jesus' feet.

She's got no etiquette. It's insolence. And it's that Jesus again. Who does she think he is? Can you imagine the shock of reading Mark's gospel in that environment?

And friends, Mark wants that first century shock as we read it. As we read this account here. All people said God through Abraham. And suddenly, friends, it's like the Berlin Wall's crumbling.

It's like the gospel's going out. Jesus is taking it into the Gentile world. It's a prelude to what the church will do later on, when Jesus has died and been raised back from the dead.

[12:32] So Jesus is breaking in to the Gentile world. And the door is opening wider and wider, isn't it? It's like this woman's got a shoulder to it, shoving it open. And Jesus says, hang on a minute.

Verse 27. Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. You might have noticed that Jesus there is speaking in parables.

And the meta for dogs, which is Gentiles. Well, it's a shock to us, isn't it? It's a shock to hear that word coming from Jesus' lips. But it was, back then, it was a Jewish expression for those outside the family of God.

And so Jesus is just using the first century colloquial language. You know, perhaps we'd say something like, you wouldn't put the horse before the cart, do you see?

But I think there's a little bit more than that as well. Perhaps also there's an element of graphic distinction that Jesus is trying to communicate here. You know, it heightens the shock of our passage.

[13:40] So, what do we expect to happen here in this passage when Jesus has said that statement? You know, we'd expect her face to drop, wouldn't we?

You can just imagine her little face dropping. Her heart sinks. Her lip begins to quiver. Her eyes are filling up with tears. She knows she's got to go home to that little daughter.

You know, that's what we'd expect, isn't it? That's what Mark's first century readers expect. Go home, back to Syrophenicia, the voice of etiquette says.

Go away from there. Go home. But this woman won't, will she? She won't go. And everyone's hiding from the embarrassment. It's like there's a drunken man got hold of the microphone in a karaoke evening somewhere.

Everyone's hiding. It's so embarrassing. And here she goes again. Is it really happening? You know, the one who speaks with authority, she's taking him on. It's amazing.

[14:42] Debating with him, the audacity of her. And we ask, you know, why hasn't she accepted no for an answer from Jesus? And the answer is, friends, well, it wasn't exactly no.

Jesus didn't exactly say no to her. It was an amber light and not a red light. You'll see that in verse 27. Look there at verse 27, do you see?

And he said to her, let the children be fed what? First, do you see? Proton is the Greek word. First. And so Jesus was saying to her, well, it's not an absolute refusal.

It's just a question of sequence, do you see? The problem is, the problem is, well, her daughter can't wait. And so she picks up with Jesus' language and she answers him in kind.

Look there at verse 28. But she answered him, yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. She's saying to Jesus, well, feed the children by all means, but there must be

something left over.

[15:48] You know, a doggy bag, excuse the pun. That's the sort of thing she's saying, isn't it? And friends, desperation and faith have come together, haven't they? And there's a rendezvous with God's unfolding purposes here.

Jesus answers her prayer. What a lovely answer that is to her ears. Verse 29. He said to her, for this statement, you may go your way. The demon has left your daughter.

And she went home and found the child lying in bed, the demon gone. Remarkable, isn't it? Isn't that amazing? Do you find that amazing? Jesus hasn't even had contact with the daughter.

It's incredible. And what is it, friends? It's victory over evil and it's spilling out into the world, do you see, through Jesus. So let's just think about the dynamic of this passage here.

Just run it through your thinking. This woman is crossing boundaries, isn't she? The love of her daughter is bringing her to Jesus. Jesus is crossing boundaries as well.

[16:51] The love of the Gentile world is bringing him. They're coming together, aren't they? Our passage is a prelude to what's going to happen in the rest of the Bible. To Jesus, go ye, he says, doesn't he?

To the disciples. And they go out into the world and we meet today. And so, friends, we as his church, we have to think ourselves, don't we, about crossing boundaries. Am I right?

to do what Jesus does here. Here's something that's doable. You know, think about Sunday. Why not invite someone to your house, maybe one Sunday each month for lunch, who you've never invited before.

Do something just simple like that. Or maybe there's someone we avoid speaking to. Why not make a bit of effort and cross those boundaries and speak to somebody that, you know, that we've kept a distance from.

Of course, friends, if we have too high a view of ourselves, we'll never do it. We'll be like the Pharisees and we'll be afraid of contamination.

[18:01] Do you see? And our churches, you know, think about our churches. They should be environments where we can interact, shouldn't they? Do you see? They should facilitate boundary crossing churches, nationalities, socio-economic situations, education.

All these boundaries should be set aside in a church and people should be able to cross boundaries. And you'll know your own opportunities, won't you? In your own lives.

You know, ever chatted to the manager at work about his life? I always find this, you know, I say to people, how are things? Very good way to start a conversation that can lead on to deeper spiritual things.

So Jesus came to get us, didn't he? He crossed boundaries to reach us and his church has tracked us down. Paul says to the Gentiles, listen, remember, remember, you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off, that's me, that's probably most folk here, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Ephesians chapter 2.

[19:20] So let's leave here, friends, today with a renewed commitment to that pattern. So that was our second and final point.

Jesus encounters the religion of the heart. And it was a stark contrast, wasn't it, to the cold, external religion of the Pharisees.

And we saw a Greek woman, didn't we, crossing boundaries and pouring her heart out to Jesus. It's like there's two tunnelers on the ground meeting each other.

The love of her daughter is driving this woman and the love of the world is driving Jesus. And they meet. There's a rendezvous and we meet as well in his church.

Shall we pray? Amen.