

Is it just me, or does it seem to you that we live in a society where people get more easily offended than they used to? Now it seems we can't get through one day in the news without someone demanding an apology from someone else for something.

I googled "apologize" on Thursday afternoon and discovered about 10 stories about apologies or "demands-for-apologies" that happened just in the past week. Here are five of them.

1- The Cleveland Indians Major League Baseball Team has had to apologize to a number of baseball players. Why? The team hosted the major League Baseball All-Star game this past weekend and made mistakes with names and faces on the score board during the game. New York Mets second basemen Jeff McNeil was offended when he came up to bat and he saw his name beside the wrong picture on the giant scoreboard. He told reporters, "I didn't really like that. I want to see my picture up there. I know my family did too."

2- An immigrant rights group in the United States has called on former Vice President Joe Biden to apologize for deportations of illegal immigrants during President Obama's presidency. 3- Britain's trade minister will reportedly apologize to President Trump's daughter and senior White House advisor Ivanka Trump. Why? Leaked memos revealed a British ambassador described Trump's administration as "dysfunctional" and "inept." That ambassador has also had to resign.

4- American Airlines has issued an apology to a Houston doctor who boarded a plane in Jamaica last month in an outfit determined to be inappropriate. They asked her to cover her outfit with a blanket or jacket before she boarded the plane because they determined her outfit was too revealing.

5- Starbucks apologized to a police force after an employee at one of its stores in Tempe, Arizona, asked six police officers to leave or move out of a customer's sight. The officers had visited the store and paid for their drinks. But then a company employee approached them about a customer not feeling safe with all the police presence. So the employee asked the officers to leave. Following the incident, users took to Twitter to support the police along with the boycott Starbucks hashtag. So Starbucks has quickly apologized.

6- I am offended this morning that Matt gets a clap for dyeing his hair, and I get no clap for dressing up as a lion and dancing.

Now in some of those situations, apologizes probably appropriate. There are some people who are offensive and need to apologize. But have we become so sensitive that we might be too easily offended and actually miss something that might be good for us? Well today, you're in for a test on your sensitivity level. The passage we're looking at contains a surprising statement that could be seen as offensive. But perhaps more surprising than the statement itself is who said it; Jesus Himself. Today, we're going to look at this statement found within another encounter between Jesus and a person in need.

This continues our journey in the Gospel of Mark. Today we're asking the question; "Who does God help?" Two weeks ago we saw Jesus quickly help a man with a dying 12 year old daughter and the woman with the 12 year bleed. Last week, we saw Jesus compassionately respond to the needs of His disciples and the crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd. Today, we will see another person come to Him out of need. I need to warn you about today's passage. Some readers might find Jesus' response offensive. So reading discretion is advised. So, we will hold off on taking offense. My prayer is we will all see what Jesus was doing here and learn how to come to Him when we are in need.

Mark 7:24-30 (ESV) - (Page 711)

²⁴ And from there he 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. ²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Jesus and His disciples have again been ministering in Capernaum. This was their base city during their ministry in the Galilee region. But Mark tells us they went from there to the region of Tyre and Sidon. These were two coastal cities on what's now called the Mediterranean Sea. But though they were relatively close to the Galilee, they were far different in cultural make up. Tyre was a Gentile or non-Jewish area. It was a powerful city state and a center for trade and commerce. Though Israelite kings David and Solomon had trade alliances with the king of Tyre, the two cities came to symbolize paganism and idolatry. In fact, one of Israel's kings, Ahab, married a Sidonian princess named Jezebel. She spread Baal worship throughout Israel leading the people away from the Lord. The Israelite prophets repeatedly

pronounced judgment on Tyre for its arrogance and greed. And a Jewish historian of the first century named Josephus stated that the inhabitants of Tyre were the “Jews bitterest enemies”.

So in going to this region, Jesus and the disciples are quite certain to escape from the crush of Jewish crowds. In fact, Mark tells us Jesus went there in the hopes that no one would locate Him. But Jesus’ presence could not be hidden.

Mark introduces us in verses 25 and 26 to a person in great need. In describing them, Mark reveals several characteristics that could be held against them by a regular Jew in the first century. If a regular Jewish rabbi of that time encountered this person, the rabbi would more than likely immediately dismiss them. So what was it about this person that could be held against them?

First, she was a woman. We have many examples throughout Scripture and in other ancient literature of the negative and condescending way women were viewed in 1st century; not only in the Jewish culture but across the ancient world. Some of the most religious men would pray things like “Lord God, I thank you that I was not born a Gentile or a woman.” Women had little or no rights. They were vulnerable to mistreatment in the case of a family breakup. Jewish court didn’t even recognize women as reliable witnesses. So strike 1 – she’s a woman.

Strike 2 – she’s a Gentile or Greek. Many religious Jews considered Gentiles unclean compared to themselves as God’s chosen people. Even if a Gentile converted to Judaism, they still weren’t allowed into the central temple districts. They had to stay in the outermost temple court.

But then we come to strike 3. Not only is she a woman. Not only is she a Gentile. She is a Syro-Phoenician woman. So she comes from the region of Tyre. She was part of that people who Josephus called the bitterest enemies of the Jews. Any ordinary rabbi or teacher would barely speak to her and may not even look at her.

But she is in desperate need. With a little daughter who has an unclean spirit. This spirit torments her girl. To a prejudiced Jewish first century person, this would seem fitting. The unclean Gentile woman has a daughter with an unclean spirit. Nothing unusual about that. But she has heard about Jesus somehow. She is desperate for her daughter. So she finds and disturbs Him from His attempted retreat. She comes and falls down before him. She begged him to cast out the demon from her daughter.

Now when Jesus was approached by the synagogue ruler back in Mark 5 with the dying 12 year old daughter, Jesus immediately went with the man to see her. When Jesus felt healing power go out of him into the woman with the

12 year bleed, he immediately stopped so he could identify her and praise her faith. When the great crowd showed up in the field where Jesus hoped to give his disciple's rest, he had compassion on them. And Jesus has already gone into a Gentile region and healed the man with the legion of demons. So we would expect a similar compassionate and tender response from Jesus to this woman's plea.

But look at what Jesus says in verse 27. 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." Okay. What does that have to do with anything? Who are the children? Why do they need to get fed first? What's this about bread? And who are the dogs? "Dogs" was a derogatory term some Jews had for Gentiles. Jews did not keep dogs for household pets. The dogs they knew about scavenged and ran wild. Since those dogs often ate garbage and dead animals which were unclean, I guess they felt the label seemed appropriate to attach to the unclean Gentiles.

But what on earth is Jesus doing using this term? I personally reacted to this statement because it seems like Jesus is calling her a dog or at least her daughter. This does not fit with the Jesus we've met in the previous episodes. I also wondered what it would be like for a woman and a mother to read this passage. So I asked several women and mothers in our congregation for their perspective.

Here are four of their responses. 1- "If I was the mom, "begging" Him to heal my demon-possessed daughter, I've probably run out of all options (because as a mom, I've tried absolutely everything I can think of for my child) & He is my last hope. I fall at his feet believing He will help me like He's helped so many others. Then He replies with a statement that basically says I'm not important enough to help... I would be shocked, frustrated, sad, angry. Why would he refuse to help my daughter, an innocent child? He's healed SO many people! What could be more important?

2- Another writes "When I read Jesus' words, I imagine being deeply offended by them. I would expect people to want to help my child, and would never expect them to suggest someone else was more important."

3- Another mom writes "My first answer is that I can only imagine how desperate this woman must've been to find anyone who could possibly help her child. Her situation was desperate and frightening, with no hope in sight. She was powerless in light of the forces she was up against. And I wonder, since it was "only a girl" who was sick, would she possibly be somewhat alone in her concern for her daughter?

Yet another writes this; 4- “I originally understood this statement to be factual & it really didn’t bother me a bit because when I was growing up and we would have a family gathering, there was never enough room for everyone to sit at the table for a meal. The kids were always fed first, the men next (sometimes that was reversed) & the women would always eat last. So, no big deal when I read this.”

Is it not interesting that your experience in life can impact how you respond to the Biblical text?

To try to unpack this, let’s establish what Jesus’ statement in vs. 27 actually says. Then we’ll consider what He may have been doing. The children refer to the Jews and the term dog refers to the Gentiles. The bread likely refers to the blessings that accompany Jesus’ ministry and the kingdom of heaven’s arrival with Jesus. So the statement would mean that Jesus was commissioned to minister to the children or the Jews first. This in fact was Jesus ministry strategy. He ministered primarily among the Jews. He would challenge the entire Jewish religious understanding and system with His coming for He was the fulfillment of all their expectations.

So He first ministered to the Jews. But the word ‘first’ does not exclude the bread coming to the Gentiles at a future time; Jews first - then Gentiles. This is in fact what happened. After Jesus resurrection, a persecution scattered the disciples from Jerusalem. This led them to bring the Gospel to Gentiles. The apostle Paul eventually got the title “apostle to the Gentiles.” So in a sense, Jesus’ response is a statement of fact about the current strategy of His mission.

But we know that He’s already ministered to Gentiles like the man possessed with the demons called Legion. There Jesus gave some of the children’s bread to a Gentile. So His response seems out of place. The woman begs for the healing of her child. Jesus talks about his mission priority? The woman and her child are part of the race that Jesus refers to as “dogs.” That in itself still creates problems.

What could Jesus be doing here?

One possibility is He said this in a way that revealed He did not really subscribe to this belief. Maybe the tone of his voice or his facial expression communicated a smile. So then Jesus would be saying something like “you know I am a Jewish rabbi and I shouldn’t even be talking to you. You know the saying, “it’s not right to take the children’s bread and feed it to the dogs.” Then she picks up on this and still persists in her request.

Some pick up on the term Jesus uses for dogs. It’s not the normal term for the wild and scavenger dogs. It’s a diminished form of the word like doggie. Some even argue that it’s more means puppies. But there is dispute about

whether using this term lessens the perceived insult. Does it really make a difference if Jesus calls her a puppy as opposed to a dog?

Some think Jesus speaks this way to test her faith. Did she really trust Him to do anything – even cross racial boundaries to heal someone obviously outside the covenant between God and Israel? Her response then reveals her faith and His willingness to do just that.

There's one other possibility that I think has a lot of merit. We will soon discover in our next three messages that the disciples had adopted the common prejudices and beliefs of their people. They believed that wealth indicated God's blessing and poverty indicated a problem of sin in your life. They believed that women were less valuable than men. They believed that greatness meant everyone served you not you serving them. And it's most likely that they did believe that dog was an appropriate label for Gentiles. So Jesus' statement would have aligned very well with their belief.

But perhaps Jesus saw something in this woman that presented Him with an opportunity. He could demonstrate that the kingdom of heaven extended beyond Israel. He could teach His disciples on the upside down values of this kingdom. So he quotes the somewhat offensive saying. The disciples likely expect the woman to leave having been put in her place.

What would the woman do? Well, if she was an ordinary person living in our easily offended and apology demanding culture today, she would probably have stood up in anger. Then she might have shook her finger in Jesus' face and said something like "how dare you claim a priority for the Jews? Don't you know what city this is? Don't you know about the power and success of this region? We run circles around you Jews when it comes to trade and commerce. And how dare you refer to me as a dog!" She would storm off, justifying being offended. But what might she miss if she took offense to His statement? Instead of being offended, she takes Jesus' statement and expands on it. She answers "Yes Lord." Yes, Lord, I acknowledge that the Jews are first in your mission and will receive the first blessings of bread. "Yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." So even though Israel receives the first blessings, some could still fall through the cracks to the Gentiles below.

Her response shows **humility, faith and spiritual discernment**. She does not take offense at the statement. She accepts all the barriers that define her as an outsider; woman; Gentile; Syro-Phoenician; dog. She comes with no status and no justification for her claim on Jesus' blessing. She doesn't look at herself. She looks at Him. She will not let her lack

of status prevent her from asking for His help. She has somehow quickly discerned that Jesus' statement does not absolutely exclude the Gentiles. So she argues "But why can't there be food or blessing for a Gentile like her daughter now? Why can't He give her some crumbs?"

So imagine the disciple's watch this. They don't believe the woman has any basis on which to make a claim. They completely agree with Jesus initial refusal of her request. And they have never seen Jesus beaten in an argument. Jesus has sparred with Jewish religious leaders, community leaders, and people with demands and even with them. He has never lost.

But what happens here? Verse 29. And Jesus said to her, "For this statement, you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." What? You said Jesus that you were not going to help her daughter because "it would not be right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." And now she comes up with a counterpoint and you change your mind? It's like he lost the debate – or more accurately intentionally lost it. This loss reveals that she did have great, persistent faith and He was teaching the disciples that the Kingdom was not going to incorporate petty prejudice.

The Moms I contacted for input also noted the incredible response of this woman. Here's a sampling. 1- "Her reply to Jesus however, revealed great wisdom!and faith in the One who could help her child." 2- "She obviously thought fast on her feet or she had a very gentle/determined spirit. 3- I like her reply - she acknowledged him as Lord and replied to His words with understanding and wisdom. 4- A wise woman - to seek Him, to recognize His power and to not give up!" "The other take-away I see is that this women's faith allows her to fully submit to Christ, even across cultural barriers, and I think about how she must have been desperate, or fully confident in Jesus, or both, in order to place herself in a situation where she was an outsider by all accounts."

She accepted that she had no standing upon which to ask for such a blessing. Yet Jesus responds to her and helps her. The account ends with the woman returning home to find her daughter lying peacefully in her bed, freed from the unclean spirit.

So this little episode answers the question **"Who receives God's help?"** The answer is **"Anyone who comes to Him humbly."** The woman did not argue on the basis of her status, accomplishments or value. She accepted her outsider status and yet still asked for His help.

But how do we do that? It means to come admitting our need and trusting Him for help. Not so many people come to God and try to enter a trading relationship with Him. “God, I will worship you if you bless me. God I will glorify you if you get me out of this situation if my life gets better. God I will go to church if you get me that promotion or position.” But to come humbly means to come with meekness and modesty not arrogant or prideful. It is a willingness to come on His terms, not on ours. The woman’s attitude is the opposite of the snippy “You owe me” attitude that many carry with them today.

But will I/we come humbly? What if Jesus says something that is true but might offend you? Jesus called people a few names; hypocrite; evil; viper; whitewashed tomb; fox; dog. Would that put you off from coming to Him? Might you say “If that’s the way He feels, I will never come to Him for help.” Our pride kicks in and we turn to the gods of our own making who will not offend us because we convince ourselves that we are truly special and deserve God’s grace and help. If Jesus offends us, does that mean we have a right to not come to Him? Or might our offense reveal something about us that needs to be faced?

One way Jesus might offend us is by saving someone we think doesn’t deserve it. What if a radical Muslim came to Jesus asking for help for their child? What if Jesus showed mercy to someone from a theologically liberal church? What if a transgender rights activist who had slammed the church came to Christ for mercy? What if He showed mercy to someone on their deathbed who had enjoyed all of sin’s pleasures their entire lives while we struggled to keep God’s way? Would that offend us? Would we demand an apology from Jesus?

One commentator writes this. “We walk away when we do not feel desperate for ourselves or our children. We may convince ourselves that we can handle the problem on our own or find another meat but pride changed angels into devils, Augustine said. Satan uses pride as a favorite device for separating us from God and from His help.” American Evangelist Dwight Moody is reported to have said, “Jesus sent no one away empty except those full of themselves.” So will we come to Him humbly?

Friend, you do not have to have some status or spiritual level of maturity to be accepted by God. You don’t have to come from a Christian family. You don’t have to be an insider – or know the right words – or have all the right theology. Jesus responds to those who come to Him humbly and don’t point to something in themselves. We need to come to Christ

in faith and receive from Him what we need. So He invites you to come to Him at His table today as you are to receive from Him what you need.

If you have never come to Him before, come to Him in surrender, admitting your need. God calls you to admit the truth about yourself; to turn away from your sins and to follow Him in faith and trust. We do that by coming to God and depending on Jesus' work on our behalf. That's the Gospel. Jesus said "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel." Even for Gentiles like you and me.