

**Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.**

**“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”**

**“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”**

**Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”**

**She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.**

### **Dramatis Personae**

First, there is the woman: She was Gentile, not Jewish. She was a Gentile woman intruding into a Jewish man’s space, uninvited. She comes across as a pushy, Gentile woman intruding into a tired, Jewish man’s space, uninvited. She was relentless. He was reluctant. She was a mother. He was a Bachelor. She was shameless and desperate: she fell at His feet and begged. He was her last, best hope.

How she knew who He was and where He was lodging and how she got to Him is a mystery. We know His inner circle of men could be jealous and protective. But she got past them. Who she was and what she did introduce great social tension into this story. We admire her grit. All of us who have watched helplessly as our child suffered are prepared to have a word with Jesus, if He had turned her away. We may not be a very moral lot, but we rally around those who suffer, especially children.

Then, there is the Lord: We know He spent many hours in the company of people who wanted a piece of Him. Anyone who does that knows how draining the experience can be. You need a break. It rejuvenates you to get away for a while from the people who need you and be with people who know nothing about you. It is some measure of His need to get away that Jesus left Israel and went to the pagan city of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast. A week at the shore! Far from home! Far from responsibilities! Positively scrumptious!

When you finally get that kind of break in the action, how does it feel to meet someone you know, who wants to talk and catch up on things back home, and all you want to do is forget about things back home? You can sympathize with Jesus.

Here is this woman shamelessly on her face at His feet, begging Him to drive a demon out of her daughter. “Lady, have we met before?” And He knew some disciples were uptight about Jewish regulations. A woman and a Gentile at that in close contact with a Jewish man sent some of those guys into fits of moral indignation. He would have to explain again that He was giving something new to the world. And His vacation was at risk. If He heals the child, word will get around, and He may as well have stayed home.

Mark’s eyewitness account says nothing about such emotions. His terse style simply reports Jesus’ response to the woman: **“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** “I think He just called me and my daughter and my people “dogs.” But she could see something we can’t see. She knew His words meant: “My ministry is for Jewish people.

Why should I do something for a Gentile like you?” But she could also see His face and hear His voice, and, yes, He was harsh, but He didn’t tell her to leave and I’d like to think she saw kindness there.

The hardness of God is often kinder than the softness of men. Was He harsh? Yes, but He opens a window for some fresh air to blow across the political correctness that suffocates daily conversation in our lives. Was He harsh? Yes, but He also shatters the sentimental picture of Jesus that clutters and sullies people’s imagination.

And He could take as good as He gave. That unnamed Syro-Phoenician woman is on record with one of the great comebacks in the history of conversation. **“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”** She accepted the terms He laid down, took His own words, and used them to counter His rebuff and persuade Him to do what she needed Him to do. I don’t know why she is not the Patron Saint for Mother’s Day. Women everywhere would be proud to stand beside her and call her one of theirs.

Jesus did not try to go one better. He responded to her unwavering faith in the face of harsh words: **“For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”** Jesus’ words made it clear that He was not going with her to her daughter. She would have to pick herself up, dust herself off, walk out of that house, and go home either to the greatest disappointment of her life or to the greatest joy of her life. That had to be a long walk home. I doubt that she walked.

### The Miracle

Finally, there is the miracle: Mark’s account is short on details but long on hope: **She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.** Really, this is astonishing. Jesus did not know this woman and never saw her daughter. He didn’t know where they lived. He didn’t ask about symptoms. He made a terse declaration: **“The demon has left your daughter,”** dismissed the woman to despair or joy, and voila! the deed was done. Who is this Man that has such powers?

Most Americans are skeptical about demons. They explain biblical talk about demons as mental illness. For the sake of this discussion, let’s assume for a minute that every biblical reference to demons can be explained as mental illness. So what? It only makes Jesus more imposing. Is anyone in the Psych Unit at Christiana Hospital saying to family with mentally ill loved ones, **“You may go; the mental illness has left your daughter,”** and voila! the deed is done? But that’s what Jesus did with the Syro-Phoenician woman.

### The Meaning of the Miracle

We need to say something else about this miracle and all Jesus’ miracles. Why are they so scarce today? Pastors often sit with people in the Emergency Room and by hospital beds and plead with God, “Please heal their loved one.” With few exceptions nothing happens that we could not attribute to surgery, medicine, therapy, and good nurses. Even in Jesus’ day, He didn’t heal everyone. We know He walked away from crowds of the sick and demon-possessed. What would we think about someone who had healing powers, who refused to heal everyone he could?

If Jesus didn’t heal everybody, why did He heal anybody? What was the purpose of His power to heal? The purpose is to make us wonder, “Who is this Man that has such

powers?” The miracles give clues to the meaning of the Man? We follow the clues best, when we apply one of the most important rules for reading the four Gospels: Pay attention to the context. We think the stories of Jesus are strung together like ingredients on a shish kebab. If you remember episodes from Jesus’ life only as disconnected stories you learned as a child, a whole new world of discovery awaits your patient exploration. Nearly every episode in the four Gospels is based on an eyewitness account. The writers of the four Gospels took those eyewitness accounts and arranged them in a sophisticated way that interprets the meaning of Jesus. What happened on Jesus’ seaside vacation swells with meaning, when we keep in mind the stories that precede and follow it.

Let’s look at the preceding story. The first 23 verses of Mark 7 tell a story of conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. **The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with “unclean,” that is with ... unwashed hands.** (Mark 7:1-2) They were not concerned with hygiene but with holiness. **“Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”** (Mark 7:5)

Jesus’ vigorous disagreement with them turned on a quotation from Isaiah: **“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”** (Mark 7:6) “You think eating with unwashed hands makes someone unclean before God. I’ll tell you what makes someone unclean before God. **‘What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, fornication, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’** (Mark 7:20-23)

“Really! Do you think washing your hands will clean up that mess? You’ve made holiness into something manageable, while the enemy of all that is holy, your heart, is far from God. And when your heart is far from God, the mess inside may become the mess outside, in your life.”

What brings our hearts near to God? It’s not a matter of being religious. The Pharisees who opposed Jesus were religious, but their hearts were far from God. Enter the Syro-Phoenician woman, on her face at Jesus’ feet, begging Him to heal her daughter! Her desperation redirected her heart to Christ. Something has to redirect our hearts to Jesus Christ. It’s the only way God He can teach us to love what is good.

Jesus said over and over, **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.”** (Mark 1:15) In other words, watch Jesus, and you will see what God’s authority looks like in human life. Watch Jesus, and you will God’s priorities on display. As the woman on her face at Jesus’ feet found out, His authority will contradict human authority, and His priorities will contradict our priorities.

Unlikely disciples become extravagant disciples as they allow themselves to be corrected by the Lord they follow. They learn sooner or later that His thoughts are not their thoughts, and His ways are not their ways. They learn sooner or later that they are doing Him no favors by following Him. He is pouring out the new wine of heaven. It remains to be seen, if His disciples then and His disciples now are wineskins that can stretch and not split under the pressure of His expanding presence.

The One who healed the woman’s daughter with one of the breadcrumbs from God’s great loaf is here with us in our reading and reflection on the Gospel of Mark. He

said to her and He says to us, “Watch me, and you will see what God is like. God is with you. Don’t miss Him!

### Take-aways

We won’t miss Him, if we keep in step with the Holy Spirit. We keep in step with the Spirit as we draw near to God with our hearts. There are many ways to do that. Let’s talk about one of them.

Jesus said, **“From within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, fornication, sexual immorality ... adultery ... lewdness.”** (Mark 7:21) The Apostle Paul called a congregation of new Christians to draw near to God with these words: **It is God’s will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.** (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5)

Do you want to do God’s will? If you are in an adulterous relationship or thinking about one, stop; and be faithful to your spouse for the sake of Christ. If you are in a same-sex relationship or thinking about one, stop; and **learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable.** If you are unmarried and sexually active, stop; and remember that **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you ... Honor God with your body.** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) If you are on pornographic Internet sites, stop; and **“neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.** (John 8:11) That’s the will of God for us who follow Christ. Doing it in our culture of intolerant, permissive sensuality can make you as desperate as the Syro-Phoenician woman, and that very desperation can redirect your heart to Christ to beg for His help as she did.

If we don’t do God’s will in this matter, the tsunami of permissive sensuality will destroy the credibility of our witness to Christ. And you can’t do this by yourself. This has to be a communal effort. We have to help each other until we here and churches everywhere have a collective determination to avoid sexual immorality in all its forms.

As you commune with Christ at the Lord’s Supper and in the reading of scripture and prayer, ask Him for the strength to help you **to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.** (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). Make your promises to Him.