

Favored
Mark 7:24 – 37; James 2:1 – 17
Sunday, September 9, 2018

Now that the kids have left for Sunday School, you can be honest with me – which one of those kids is your favorite? You’ve got a favorite, right? One of those kids that you just like a little more than the others. If you had to choose one for yourself, which one would you choose? Which one of *your* kids is *your* favorite? I mean, we all have favorites from time to time, right? We’re only human. There are times when one kid is a little easier, a little nicer. Or one of the kids is a little more difficult or frustrating or mean and we’re like, “You are *not* my favorite right now.” We *all* have favorites, right? Who’s your favorite *church member*? It’s only natural that we like *some* people more than *others*, right? Some people we have a little more in common with, or we’ve shared more experiences with. Who’s your favorite?

We’ve been *taught* not to play favorites. That’s a societal thing. And everyone *talks* a mean game when it comes to that. I remember in my previous church there was a woman named Janet. She was about 80 years old and had four kids. And she would *always* tell me, “Pastor, I love *all* my kids the same. I never played favorites. I think that’s so wrong when I see parents doing that. I love them *all* the same.” And I couldn’t help but think, “*Really?* Because I’ve met your kids, and there’s two that I could eliminate right off the bat.” It’s only natural that from time to time, for whatever reason, we favor *some* people over *others*, right?

Jesus played favorites. He was *always* taking Peter, James, and John places that he didn’t take the *other* nine disciples, doing special things with them. He didn’t tell *Levi*, “On *you* I will build my church.” He told *Peter* that. And you’re going to tell me that he liked *Judas* exactly the same as he liked the others? We even see it in this reading from Mark’s gospel. **(READ MARK 7:24–37)**

Jesus *leaves Israel* and goes to Tyre, which is just across the border in Lebanon. He has constantly been trying to get away from the crowds of people who are following him. They all want healings and miracles and he needs a break. So he leaves the country. But *even there*, they know who he is. A Syrophenician mother comes to him, begging him to heal her daughter, who is possessed by a demon. Our bibles say that she “bowed down at his feet,” but the word that gets translated here as “bowed” is the Greek word *prospipto*, which has connotations of *rushing upon someone* and *throwing yourself down at their feet*. This wasn’t a *solemn* act. This was a *desperate* act.

So what we have here is a non-Jewish woman, implicitly impure (because she lives outside the land of Israel and outside the law of Moses), a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, initiating a conversation with a man she does not know.¹ None of this should have happened. According to Jewish law and the social norms of the time, this is not someone that Jesus should be interacting with.

But she *begs* him to heal her daughter, and he says to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” *He calls her a dog*. I’ve read a lot of commentaries that try to soften this. One said, “If I say to my wife, ‘You lucky dog,’ I’m not actually calling her a dog.” Okay, but Jesus doesn’t say, “You lucky dog,” here. He’s not being funny or nice. There is no way to soften this. He calls her a dog. In Jesus’ time and culture, *dogs* was a term that was commonly used to refer to Gentiles. Dogs were not cute, loveable household pets, but semi-wild scavengers who ate unclean food.² It was a *slur*.

¹ Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3761

² Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, pg. 139.

When Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first,” he’s talking about the people of Israel as the primary recipients of God’s favor and blessing. Jesus is playing favorites here. He is saying, “God’s favor and blessing is meant for *them*, and you can’t just take that and give it to people who are unclean.” He is telling her that she is not worthy of the healing power of God because she is not Jewish. He is favoring one group of people over another.

But this woman is desperate, and she doesn’t let his answer deter her. She says, “Yes, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She doesn’t say, “You’re *wrong* for saying that,” or, “You’re being unfair.” She actually *affirms* that God’s favor and blessing is primarily for the people of Israel. She says, “I’m not trying to overturn all of that. Just give me what’s leftover.” She sees the power of God at work in Jesus, and she believes that God’s grace is sufficient for *all* in need.³ And it works. Jesus changes his mind. He recognizes genuine faith in her, and he heals her daughter.

We’ll come back to this story in just a minute, but let’s look at what happens next.

Jesus goes to the region of the Decapolis; again, a non-Jewish region. Some people bring to him a deaf man with a speech impediment, and they beg Jesus to heal him. But again, this man is (presumably) not Jewish. According to Jewish law and custom, Jesus should not be interacting with him, much less *healing* him. He is not *avored* by God. Like that woman, he is an *outsider*. But Jesus takes him aside and heals him. Maybe his experience with that woman is still fresh in his mind; we don’t know. For whatever reason Jesus crosses religious and cultural boundaries to heal this man.

³ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, After Pentecost 2*, pg. 36.

There's a lot we could say about the *way* in which Jesus heals him, but one thing stood out to me. Jesus looks up to heaven, sighs, and says, "Ephphatha – *be opened.*" He is asking God to open the man's ears and tongue. And while he said that to the *man* – it says, "he sighed and said to *him*, "Be opened," – is there a way in which we can read this as Jesus saying to *God*, "Be opened to this man. Be opened to Gentiles. Be opened to outsiders. Be opened to *all* those in need of your favor and blessing." The man's ears and tongue were opened. But through these two stories, for the first time in Mark's gospel, *God* is open to Gentiles.

Jesus is "opened up" to outsiders, where he was previously closed off, and in that openness, they find God's healing grace.

And here's the thing about that. *We are* that woman. *We are* that man. *We are Gentiles*, non-Jewish people, previously excluded from the favor and blessing of God. *We are outsiders* to God's covenant with Israel. But through Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God has been opened to us, and we have been welcomed in. What was reserved for Israel is now extended to *all*. *We are outsiders* in need of God's healing grace.

The other thing this means is that, like Jesus, *we* must be opened to outsiders. *We* must be willing to have our eyes and ears opened to the suffering and the need of those around us – those who cannot take care of themselves, those who no one else notices or pays attention to, those who no one else thinks are worthy. *We* must be willing to cross geographical boundaries, ethnic boundaries, political boundaries, religious boundaries, and social boundaries like Jesus did, to share God's healing grace with *all* who are in need.

Our reading from James helps flesh this out a little more. First, James follows up on this idea of favoritism by saying, “Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and you take notice of the one wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Sit here!’ while you tell the one who is poor to sit on the floor, have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” You would *expect* James to then tell them to treat everyone the same; show no favoritism. But he doesn’t do that. He says, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?”

We *hear* that, and there’s a part of us that reacts *against* that. We say, “Wait a minute. If God has *chosen* the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, and *I’m not poor*, does that mean that God hasn’t chosen *me*? That *I* can’t be rich in faith? That God’s kingdom does not belong to *me*?”

But think of it like this. Back in the spring, when our kids were playing baseball, there was this one boy on Ryan’s team who was *just not good*. You could tell that he was way behind where the other kids were. When he swung his bat, it was this kind of weak, half-hearted effort. The other kids were *laughing* at him. And the coaches had to focus on all these other kids; they couldn’t ignore the other kids to focus on *just him*. So I went over to him, pulled him aside, and spent some time with him working on his swing. I *saw* that he needed help, so I gave him special one-on-one attention. I *chose* him. I *avored* him. Not because I didn’t *care* about any of the *other* kids or that they didn’t *matter*. But because I knew that he was at risk of being overlooked and falling behind.

This is what James is saying God has done with the poor. That, yes, of course God loves *all* people, but that there is a soft spot in the heart of God for the poor because they are at risk of being overlooked and falling behind. That God is a fan of the underdog, because that's who needs God's help the most. And James is telling *us* that, like God, *we* need to look out for the poor, the weak, the oppressed, the outsiders, those who are hurting and suffering and alone, those who cannot take care of themselves.

And James says that the way we *do* that is not just with thoughts and prayers. He says, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" He's not just talking about our *favoritism*. He's talking about our *indifference* to those who are in need.

I came across a quote last week that plays off of Jesus' words in Matthew 25, where he says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, and as you do to the least of these, you do to me." But this one says, "I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release. I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely, and you left me alone to go and pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God. But I am still very hungry and lonely and cold."

Theologian Miroslav Volf once said, "There is something deeply hypocritical about *praying* for a problem you are unwilling to *resolve*."

Of course prayer matters, and we *should* hold in prayer those who are in need. But what James is saying here is that if that's *all* we do, then it's not really a reflection of our faith in Jesus Christ. Favoritism and indifference to human need do not reflect faith in Jesus Christ. Faith that exists in only in your head without actions to back it up, James says, is *dead*. It's useless. If we truly love Christ, we have to *show* it, acting in concrete ways that provide for those in need, especially those who are outsiders.

We were outsiders who have been brought into the love and favor and blessing of God. How will we now treat those whom we see on the outside?

Jesus *saw* that woman and that man, he *listened* to them, and he was *opened up* to them. Who will *we* see? Who will *we* listen to? Who is trying to teach us right now? Are we willing to learn from them? Are we willing to expand our compassion and change our actions?⁴ Are we willing to be opened up and *be* God's healing grace to those who are in need?

⁴ Jill Duffield, *Presbyterian Outlook*:

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102135377571&ca=400a62be-6ced-4856-ae8a-8e15b7334eca>