

What does Jesus think about identity politics?

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[0 : 01] Mark chapter 7 from verse 24. 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 impure 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 little children eat all they want, he told her.

For it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs. Lord, she replied, 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. So she went home and found her child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

[1 : 10] Amen. Now what I'd like to do is spend some time just explaining what these verses mean and applying them to our lives today. In our world today, identity politics is a big deal.

Identity politics generally describes groups of people who share an identity, whether it be racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, social or cultural, and who seek to promote their own specific interests or concerns.

But it seems to divide our society into contending groups of people. Because they focus on the political issue that they feel is the most important for them.

And so you hear terms like white privilege, where the assumption is that some aspect of a person's identity makes them more privileged than other people. And I simply mention this, no matter what we might think about identity politics, simply to say it's part of our society today.

So what does Jesus think about identity politics? Because the sense of privilege or entitlement comes up in that Bible reading we had in Mark chapter 7.

[2 : 26] It comes out of this astonishing encounter between Jesus and a Gentile woman. And so the background is that the Jews were regarded as the privileged people, the people of God.

But what we actually see is that no one is more privileged than anyone else when it comes to God. Jesus shows how he came for all people, including you and me.

So Jesus smashes through all the identity politics of his day to teach us how God wants us to approach him. Because we can't approach God on the basis of our rights or our privileges.

We can only get to God by humbly trusting in Jesus Christ. And so this woman in this story models this for us.

And so what I'd like to do is to go through it just in three simple points. First, we see a scandalous request. Second, we see a surprising response. And third, we see a superb reply.

[3 : 31] So first of all, a scandalous request. Jesus moves out of Jewish territory and into Gentile territory. And Jesus goes into what we would know today as Lebanon and Syria.

So why does he change location? Well, the only clue that we're given in the passage is that Jesus wanted to keep a low profile. And yet he couldn't keep out of the public eye.

And that's why this woman approaches him. And so we read. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure 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. So this is a desperate woman. And so she hunts Jesus down and she finds him.

And then she falls down at Jesus' feet and she begs for Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. And it's a scandalous request because this woman had no right to approach Jesus.

[4 : 37] There were all kinds of barriers between Jesus and this woman. And Mark highlights these for us. There are boundaries of gender, of ethnicity, and of ritual purity.

So first of all, she was a woman. And she gate crashes somebody else's house in order to meet a Jewish man. And now in those days, Jewish teachers wouldn't associate with women at all. Especially Gentile women. And yet she pushes her way in to see Jesus. And secondly, she was a Gentile. Mark wants us to know that she was a Greek.

And so she's a foreigner. And she didn't have the privilege of belonging to Israel, the Jews, the people of God. And then thirdly, she is unclean.

It's not because she didn't wash, but it's because that's how Jews regarded Gentiles in those days. And so she's got everything going against her, religiously, culturally, socially, and morally.

[5 : 38] She had no right to approach Jesus. And she deserved nothing from Jesus. And yet she had no one else to turn to, did she? She was desperate.

Her daughter was demon-possessed. And like any loving parent who loves their child, they will do whatever it takes to make sure their child gets what they need and gets help.

And that's what she does. And so she falls down at Jesus' feet and begs for Jesus to drive out the demon. She believed that Jesus could help her. And there's no way she would break all of these social customs and risk everything unless she was convinced that Jesus could heal her daughter. She's the most unlikely person you could imagine to approach Jesus. But what we see is that Jesus doesn't turn her away. And so before we move on to our next point, it's worth emphasizing that we should never think that we can't approach Jesus.

It doesn't matter who we are. And it doesn't matter what we've done. We don't need to sort our life out before we go to Jesus for help. And so if you're feeling desperate, in fact, even if you are desperate, don't be slow in going to Jesus.

[6 : 59] What we see here is that he won't turn you away. So that's our first point, a scandalous request. Second point is a surprising response. Jesus' response to the woman sounds a bit odd.

Let me read it, verse 27. First, let the children eat all they want, he told her. For it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.

Sounds like a total insult. Is Jesus calling her a dog? Now, calling somebody a dog in any culture is pretty offensive.

So what is this about? Well, the first thing to grasp is that they didn't live in a canine-loving society like we do today. In our society, people love their dogs.

And you can see it here in Dogstone Park or Kelvin Grove Park. People make a fuss about their dog. You see it all over Instagram. People love their dogs. In fact, people idolise their dogs.

[8 : 01] They even let them sleep in the house. They even let them sleep in their bedroom. They let them go on the sofa. You might even let them sleep in their bed. That's how much people love dogs.

And some people even get their dogs in doggy clothing and dress them in it and walk them around the park. So the point is, our culture has got a high regard for dogs. But that wasn't the case back in Middle Eastern culture and possibly still today because back then, for them, dogs were wild animals.

They weren't tame, friendly animals that you could cuddle. They were dirty scavengers that you would want to avoid. And they roamed around the streets and they would eat rubbish. And they would also even eat dead bodies if they saw them lying there.

That's why dogs were unclean for the Jews. But dog was also a term that the Jews used to call Gentiles. They were called Gentile dogs because they were seen as being unclean.

And so how should we understand what Jesus is saying? Well, this is more of a parable than a put-down from Jesus. Here's how it is, Jesus says. The children are the children of Israel, the Jews.

[9 : 10] And the dogs are the Gentiles. And so Jesus is saying here that there's a Jewish priority in his mission. So the order is Jews first, then Gentiles.

And so the key to understanding what Jesus is saying here is in the word he uses for dogs.

Because it's an unusual Greek word. It's not the normal word for dogs that would refer to wild dogs. The word that he uses here means small dogs. Or like puppies. Cute little things. The kind of dogs that you would want to keep in your house as pets.

And so you feel very differently, don't you, towards a puppy dog compared to a wild scavenger dog. You'd be happy to have them as part of your family and under the table at mealtime.

And so Jesus says you feed the children first and then the dogs. Now this woman's a mum, so she knows this. She knows that the dogs don't get fed first.

[10:14] But she knows that they do get fed. It's just that the children come first. And so this is a parable rather than an insult. It's an invitation from Jesus to deeper conversation with this woman. Jesus is illustrating to her that in his mission to the world, he came on a mission to the world. And in this mission, Jews were first and then Gentiles. And so the crucial word that Jesus uses is the word first. First. Jesus came as the Messiah God, promised to his people, the Jews. He came to them. But that doesn't mean that it's just the privileged people of God who Jesus is for. Because Jesus came for everybody. And so it just means that it's the privileged people of God before everybody else. Jesus would make way for everyone to come home to God. First Israel, then the world. [11:13] And so when Jesus says the children should be fed first, he's not denying the fact that there are other hungry mouths to feed. And they were going to be fed. So just to illustrate, my children want to play a game and they come to me asking.

Can we play a game? Our favorite game right now, actually, in these days of isolation is Monopoly, the electronic bank card edition, which is great. You should order on Amazon. And other companies are available too.

So if they come to me and ask, can I play a game? I might say to them, first, make sure your bedrooms are tidy. Now, I'm not saying that we're not going to play a game. What I'm saying is there's a priority and there's an order.

Bedrooms first. Game next. And so in a nuanced way, Jesus is saying that he is for all people. He came on a mission to rescue us.

It started with the privileged people of God, the Jews. But now it is for everybody, including you and including me. So that's our second point. A surprising response.

[12:16] First, a scandalous request. Second, a surprising response. And then thirdly and finally, a superb reply. The woman's reply is superb. She says in verse 28, Lord.

Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. Notice that she calls Jesus Lord. She's the first and only person in the gospel of Mark to call Jesus by that title.

And so she is not offended by anything that Jesus has just said to her. Instead, she takes Jesus at his word and she responds to him.

She doesn't challenge the priority that Jesus speaks of or her lack of privilege. But she seizes the opportunity that Jesus offers. She understands Israel's privilege.

And she accepts that there's an order and she isn't first in the queue. But her reply is so beautiful because she applies the logic of Jesus' parable to herself and to her daughter.

[13:20] So what Jesus said might sound harsh to us, but it gave her hope. We might have seemed like this was an insult to her, but to her it was an invitation for more.

So Jesus doesn't shut the door in her face. Jesus leaves the door gently open for her to nudge her way through. And that's why she reminds Jesus that even the dogs get the children's crumbs.

So she'd like some of those crumbs for herself and for her daughter. Her response is both humbling and moving at the same time. It's as if she's saying, Jesus, okay, I get you.

I understand that there's an order in your mission, but I'm not asking for the children's food. Give the children their food, but please just let me get some of the crumbs. She knows she's not privileged enough to eat at the table.

She knows she doesn't deserve anything from Jesus, but that's all fine. She just wants to be fed. Like the dogs. Her superb reply is completely consistent with Jesus's parable.

[14:31] Just think about it. What happens when children eat food? If you've got young children, they eat food. All of it ends up on the floor. They drop the crumbs everywhere. But dogs don't have to wait until the children's meal is finished before they get to work.

And so this woman is not asking Jesus to stop feeding the children, the children of Israel. She's asking that while they're being fed, surely Jesus in his abundance has got enough that she might get some promise.

She realizes Jesus can provide. Surely there's something for someone like her. I reckon she gives Jesus the answer that he was looking for.

She had faith to respond to Jesus's invitation. Let me read. Verse 29. Jesus grants her request.

And in doing so, she displays a faith in Jesus Christ that nobody else has shown so far in the Gospel of Mark. Even though she's the most unlikely person to do so.

[15 : 46] So Mark's showing us the religious leaders, they don't get Jesus. The disciples of Jesus, they don't get Jesus. And yet this unclean Gentile woman gets Jesus.

And so this encounter not only tells us that Jesus is for all people, but it shows us how we should approach God. Because God's kingdom is for everybody.

And yet none of us is going to get into God's kingdom because we deserve it because nobody does. We get in by recognizing that we don't deserve it. But by putting our faith in Jesus instead.

This woman knew she didn't deserve anything from Jesus. So she came with no sense of entitlement, no privilege. And she placed her request solely on who Jesus is.

Not on her rights. In Jesus, she could see absolute power alongside extreme mercy and compassion. And so she approached Jesus, not on the basis of what she deserved, but on the basis of what Jesus could give.

[16 : 57] And so we, too, can only approach God with humility and utter dependence on Jesus Christ. And that means acknowledging our desperate need as sinful, broken people.

And at the same time, putting our hope in God's gracious and loving nature to accept us no matter what we're like. And so we have got to approach God without any sense of privilege or right or entitlement.

Knowing that we deserve nothing because of who we are, but going to Jesus because of who he is. Listen to this prayer by a man called Thomas Cramner in the Book of Common Prayer, an old prayer book.

And it was to prepare worshippers in church for receiving communion, the Lord's Supper. And it's based on this story. The language is rather archaic, but the prayer goes, It's a prayer that comes right out of Mark chapter 7.

And it's something called the prayer of humble access. Because it reminds us that we must humble ourselves before God. And that's exactly what this woman did.

[18 : 30] And it's exactly what we have got to do as well. Because we can only receive God's mercy through the death of Jesus on the cross.

Because on the cross, Jesus, the Son of God, was forsaken by God the Father so that we could be accepted. Jesus was prepared to be excluded as a child from the table so that we could be adopted and given a place.

In other words, Jesus took the place of a dog and he humbled himself to death so that we could be raised up as sons and daughters and given a privileged position as a part of God's everlasting family.

So can you see how the good news of Jesus Christ shatters our pride and forces us to acknowledge our complete unworthiness? And yet, at the same time, the good news of Jesus Christ is an invitation for us to freely receive the abundant salvation that is on offer to us.

And so if we ever think, just even for a moment, that we deserve this from God, then let this woman's example shame us out of our self-righteousness.

[19 : 44] But on the other hand, if we feel so undeserving of God's gracious offer, let this woman's example affirm us of his love for you and for me.

Jesus is for all people.

Jesus is for all people. Because we are all on a level playing field before God. And we're privileged, not because of anything in us, not because of who we are, not because of anything we do, but we're privileged because of who we can become in Jesus Christ.

He gives us a brand new identity. And only when we see our need of Jesus and receive him will we get that identity.

And that will give us real self-worth. I'm going to pray now and then we're going to close with a song. Let me pray. Thank you, our loving God, for sending Jesus into this world on a mission.

[21 : 11] We thank you that he came for everyone. And we thank you that everyone who humbles themselves before you and puts their faith in Jesus finds adoption in your family that lasts forever.

And so we pray that we would not turn away from your gracious and loving invitation to us, but that we would accept it and place our faith in Jesus. And in doing so, find value and worth and an identity that no one or nothing can take from us.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.