

When the gospel goes to the dogs (Mark 7:24-30)

If we are to get past our discomfort with the name-calling, we will have to look more closely and note what Jesus does with the word *dog*.

by [Heidi Husted](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

In the first half of Mark 7 Jesus says that you can't judge a book by its cover; you must look beyond external factors like nationality or religious heritage or social position to get the real story on someone's faith. He then puts this theory into practice by traveling a good 100 miles out of his way into the region of Tyre and Sidon—into the heart of paganland—to make the arduous journey from the theoretical to the practical.

The protagonist is a mother who displays real chutzpah. She gets in Jesus's face, begging him to heal her daughter. There is only one problem: she is one of the "dogs." It's a disparaging metaphor, a derogatory term popular at the time for describing all gentiles. It means she has no business being in the company of a Jew, much less the Messiah. The social gap is cavernous. She is like an illegal alien marching into the Oval Office to see President Clinton. Or like a bag lady trying to make an appointment with Bill Gates. She begs Jesus to heal her daughter, but it sounds as if he doesn't have time for her.

"Let the children [of Israel] be fed first," he says, "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." On one level, it's the answer you'd expect. Evidently Jesus's long-range evangelistic plan is to go the Jews first and then later to the Greeks. So Jesus is not so much saying no to the woman as he is saying, "First things first; one thing at a time."

Apparently, Jesus does not want to dilute his mission. But does he have to use the derogatory language of the day and call the woman a dog? If we are to get past our discomfort with the name-calling, we will have to look more closely and note what Jesus does with the word. Dale Bruner, commenting on the parallel passage in

Matthew, notes that Jesus puts “Jews and gentiles under the same roof.” Indeed, Jesus’s use of the diminutive form of the word “dogs” could be translated “little dogs,” or perhaps “house dogs.” These terms represent a step toward including the gentiles. Now “the gentiles are no longer outside in the streets; they are now in the house.” And in a moment—thanks to this loving mother’s theological discernment—the dogs “will be at the table,” the place of true fellowship.

In any case, the woman does not back down. Dog indeed! She keeps right on nipping at Jesus’s heels, which showcases not only her debating skills, but her faith. She dares to take his metaphor and turn it back on him. “Children get fed before the dogs? You’ve got that right, Lord! But even the dogs get to eat the children’s crumbs; even the pets get the scraps that fall from their master’s table!” She is arguing that even on his own terms, there should be something from him—some scrap of grace—for someone like her who comes to him in faith. She is challenging him. “What are you going to do, Lord: Judge me by externals only—or judge me by my heart?”

This becomes the day that the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to the dogs. Where the traditions of the elders and the religious law could see only an outcast, Jesus sees the woman’s heart of faith. He heals her child (a long-distance, third-party healing no less). Furthermore, from this point on Jesus does not hold his saving power in reserve, but expands the circle of God’s mercy to include those once considered outsiders. According to Bruner, he “opens himself to the whole world in mission.” He welcomes all who put their faith in him.

The day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us. We are some of the “dogs” who have received the good news of the gospel! When Jesus opened himself up to mission to the whole world, he opened his church to the world. Now we are to open ourselves to the whole world in mission.