

“Addressing the Tension in the Texts”
James 2:1–10, 14-17; Mark 7:24–37
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September 8, 2024

The juxtaposition of biblical texts can be jarring, reminding us of the need for interpretation. Some people claim, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it,” but we have to ask, “Which part of the Bible?” because, among other things, the Bible contradicts itself.

Are we talking about the part of the Bible that tells women to be quiet at church and ask their husbands at home if they have a question (1 Corinthians 14:34-36)? Or are we talking about the parts where Deborah is a judge and prophet (Judges 4:4), Phoebe is a deacon (Romans 16:1), and women are told to cover their heads when they preach (1 Corinthians 11:5)?

We can pick and choose verses and take them out of context to support our biases, but when we place certain passages alongside others, we realize we have to interpret in some way. As our own beloved Elmo Scoggin used to say, every translation is an interpretation anyway. So, we are interpreting already when we read in English, but when we read certain texts together, we have to interpret more.

Consider two texts we have read today. James makes it clear that practicing favoritism in the church is not only not ideal; it calls into question our faith in Christ. We cannot claim to follow Jesus who embraces all people in love while practicing favoritism, for example, treating well-dressed rich people better than we do poor people who can’t afford to dress so well. This squares with what we know and believe about Jesus, but in the passage from Mark, Jesus, yes, the same Jesus, practices favoritism. He treats the Syrophenician woman and the deaf man with a speech impediment very differently.

Because the woman is a Gentile, he at first refuses to cast a demon out of her daughter, saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” “The children” here are the Israelites while “the dogs” are the Gentiles, the latter being a term of derision, not a comparison to beloved pets, which is problematic

on many levels... Only when she pushes back, saying, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” a statement we understand, does he say, “... the demon has left your daughter.”

By contrast, when the deaf man with a speech impediment is brought to him in need of healing, Jesus takes the man aside and heals him. He is no longer on foreign soil, in Gentile land, he is among his people, and this home boy receives better treatment. It’s as if the woman and her family are on Medicaid while the man has a Platinum Plan with Blue Cross Blue Shield!

Jesus clearly seems to be practicing favoritism which not only goes against what the reading from James says, it flies in the face of everything we believe about Jesus! So, what do we do with this disconnect, with the tension created by reading these texts together? What James says squares with everything else Jesus says and does in the canonical Gospels, he welcomes everyone into his presence and treats each person with dignity and respect. So, the issue seems to be with the reading from Mark. How do we account for Jesus’ behavior?

Some people try to explain it away, saying that perhaps he is testing the woman’s faith. But why would he test her faith and not the man’s? Others ignore Jesus’ words and dismiss their significance, saying, “It doesn’t really matter what he says to her. The point is — her daughter is made well!” Except it does matter what he says to her. Jesus heals the daughter but demeans the character of the mother.

Jesus says what he says. We cannot omit these words from the text, especially in this time when women are often publicly demeaned, women of color even more so. This derogatory way of talking about or to a woman who is “other” plays poorly in its first-century context, and even more poorly in ours. What do we do with it?

The text says Jesus goes to Tyre to get away from the stress of trying to care for the world. He is exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We know the feeling. He needs a break; he is trying to refuel when this woman finds him. He hasn’t hidden well enough. We know this feeling too. Perhaps Jesus isn’t at his best, and thus we might find a little grace here. There are times when we are not at our best — when we snap back at a loved one unfairly, when we bark at the friend

asking for help, when we become angry with the person on the street asking for money. It isn't really who we are, we're just exhausted.

Whatever we make of Jesus' harsh words, we should note the woman's role in this story, her strength of character that Jesus praises. When Jesus speaks to her in a condescending way, she doesn't back down and walk away. She talks back to Jesus, she uses her voice to advocate for her daughter, she lets him have it, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs!" She models a healthy practice for us, being honest with God, and speaking up for those who have no voice.

In regard to honesty, it is what God wants most from us, and God knows what we are thinking anyway. Trying to hide our feelings when we are angry with or disappointed by God is pure folly and wholly unnecessary. Job sounds off to God about the unfair suffering he faces, Moses expresses his discontent with trying to lead a bunch of whiners, Jesus tells God he doesn't want to go through with the plan of suffering on a cross. And God does not zap any of these people.

I have shared with some of you before this prayer of a rural southern preacher included in a biography of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Lord, send us rain. The ground is dry and hot and burns the bare feet walking over it. The tobacco leaves next to it are curling up. The cotton plants are wilting in the sun. The corn stalks are already stunted in their growth, the fodder leaves are withering, there won't be anything but nubbins, and Lord thou knowest I hate worse than hell to shuck nubbins. So, Lord, send us rain. Don't send us any flimsy dizzle drazzle. Send us a gully washer and a trash mover.
(*Harry Emerson Fosdick*, by Robert Moats Miller, p. 239)

Being honest is a good thing. The Gentile woman's experience tells us it is okay to be honest with the God who was in Christ.

In regard to advocacy, consider Abraham's role of talking God down from destroying two cities in Genesis 18. Or consider Moses' role in talking God down from destroying all the Israelites in Exodus 32. The Syrophoenician woman is speaking on behalf of her daughter, but

she is following in the footsteps of Abraham, Moses, and many others. Sometimes we advocate before people in power, as when Moses tells Pharaoh to let his people go. Other times we speak on behalf of others to God. In either case, advocacy is a sacred pursuit.

I think of Bryan Stevenson advocating for an African-American man named Walter McMillian who was on death row in Alabama for a murder he did not commit. I think of the attorneys, ministers, and personal friends of mine who advocated for Darryl Hunt who spent nineteen years in prison in our state for a rape and murder he did not commit. It is a holy and courageous calling to speak up for others whether in a court system or before God. The Gentile woman in Mark's story models such courage while Jesus seems to have an off day.

Yet, having said all this, we should not lose sight of the fact that Jesus heals the woman's daughter in the end, and it is what we do, James says, that matters most. It is no good to say we have faith but not have works; to say, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," but not help a hungry person supply their bodily needs.

It is like politicians saying in the aftermath of each mass shooting, "We extend our thoughts and prayers to the families of the victims." Saying that is not bad, but saying it and not doing what you can to effect change, James says, is useless. Jesus may get the words wrong, and this matters, but his actions speak louder than words. In the end, he acts in a way consistent with the rest of his ministry. Everyone is included in his love, there is no place for favoritism, each person has dignity and worth.

We might reach a different conclusion if we read only this story from Mark, ignore the ending, set aside the passage from James, and neglect most of Jesus' ministry. That seems absurd, but it's what a lot of people do. Rather than reading prayerfully all of scripture, people pick and choose texts and distort them or let someone else do so for them.

There is an abundance of distortion about Christian teaching these days, especially when it comes to whether God only cares about people who look, think, pray, believe, and love like us, or embraces all people in love. There may seem to be some tension in our texts about this, but when we read them carefully and together, we realize the basic message is clear — favoritism has no place in God's realm.