

# Irresistible Community: Table Scraps

Mark 7.24-30

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First Christian Church

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From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said 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.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

We’re continuing our journey on the theme of “Irresistible Community,” the community we can’t resist being a part of because Jesus invited us. A big part of that community centers around the fellowship of the table, specifically the Lord’s Table. But that raises a couple of questions. Unless we’re invited, do we really belong there? And if the Lord is our host, what kind of table manners does the Lord expect?

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For years now, our family has gone to the dogs. Right now, we have two of them—my daughter’s dog, Zoey, a rescue mutt who used to eat my books but now prefers to watch TV with me and share my almonds, and my son and grandson’s dog Amelia, who is an extremely bouncy bird dog who prefers to eat remote controls. We have to throw them out whenever

we have a family meal, or they'll be putting their muzzles in our laps and staring at us with large, guilt-inducing eyes. And because I'm a soft touch, if I'm eating there by myself, I'll sometimes feed them from the table. My late mother, a lady of great civility, who kept a spotless house and owned a well-thumbed copy of Emily Post's Book on Etiquette, would have been appalled. Growing up, we were never allowed to bring a dog in the house. *They belong outside!* Decent people don't feed dogs from the family table. *That's just trashy behavior!* That's how I was raised. Now I have dogs begging around my family table because I felt sorry for them and enabled that behavior.

This past week, I gave a lecture at MSU on the History of the Christian Bible at the invitation of a gifted young professor who is teaching a course entitled, "Philosophy of Religion." I tried to talk so much that there wouldn't be any time left over for questions, but one perceptive young student with quick reflexes politely raised her hand when I was catching my breath, and asked, "If the Church was born after the resurrection of Jesus, why is the Old Testament three-fourths of the Christian Bible?" That was a great question. The answer has to do with the foundation on which the Christian faith was built—the God of the Christians is also the God of the Jews. For reasons only the Lord can explain, God made a series of special covenants with them—through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through Moses and the Prophets. They were, for whatever mysterious reason—and they themselves could never explain it—God's Chosen

People. Theologians call it, “the scandal of particularity.” As Ogden Nash wrote, “How odd that God should choose the Jews.” Not that being God’s Chosen People made life easier for them—in many ways, it made life much harder because God had far higher standards for them. The rest of humanity was only expected to follow seven natural laws called the Noachide laws—don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t commit adultery, don’t lie, don’t blaspheme, don’t eat the meat of a living animal, and establish a system of justice to enforce those six. By contrast, the Chosen People were expected to obey 613 laws given to Moses—including not only the Ten Commandments (or as I prefer to call them, the Top Ten Commandments), but also some curious ones like not eating bacon or shellfish and not wearing clothes made out of two different kinds of fabric. Why did the Chosen People have to obey those? Because God said so. The rest of the world can eat bacon to its heart’s content and wear cotton/polyester coveralls, but they couldn’t, because they’d been called. Because they were different. Because they had been chosen, and being chosen entailed some very high obligations the rest of the world did not have. Jesus was a Jew. His mother Mary was a Jew, and Joseph was a Jew, and the 12 original apostles were all Jewish, and so were Paul and Mary Magdalene and all of the earliest Christians. When Paul and the Gospel writers refer to holy scripture, they are referring to the Hebrew scriptures—our Old Testament. That makes every Christian a spiritual child of Judaism. And despite all the times in their history that they had

been disobedient, dispossessed, defeated in battle, sent into exile, and horribly abused by the world, God's Covenant with the Chosen People was never revoked. That's why they divided the world into two groups of people—the small minority that was Chosen, and everybody else, who were called Gentiles and who were not chosen. The judgement of God against the Chosen People, as rendered by the Prophets, always, *always*, involved the times when the Chosen People wanted to be just like everybody else—when they got tired of striving to fulfill God's commandments, and just wanted to behave like the Gentiles. That was not an option that was open to them.

Jesus' ministry began among his own people, but in today's scripture reading, he was in the alien territory of Tyre and Sidon in what is now present-day Lebanon. A Syro-Phoenician mother—a Gentile, a non-Jew, who, if she practiced the prevalent religion of her community, would have been a polytheist (i.e, she worshiped many gods)—came to Jesus and begged him to cast a demon out of her little girl. She had evidently heard of his great, miraculous power. Jesus said the most shocking thing he says in all of the Gospels: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” That does not sound like Jesus. To tell a grieving, heartsick mother that either she or her daughter were dogs? Jesus really said *that*?

There are some ugly pictures of dogs in the Bible. In a few wealthy, cosmopolitan homes, they might have been considered pets, but more

often they were regarded as scavenging pariahs, like the dogs that licked the wounds of poor, starving Lazarus in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus. But maybe the key phrase about dogs comes from Proverbs 26.11, a passage repeated in II Peter 2.22. It said that people who repented and promised to follow God's law, but then reverted to their bad old ways, were like a dog that upchucked and then returned to its own mess. They were like the good old boy who was in desperate need of a job, but who had been kind of wild all of his life and had made really bad choices, but he finally got the opportunity to get his dream job if he did well on a final interview. But he'd gone on a bender the night before, and he got up late with a hangover, and when it was almost time for the interview, he was frantically driving around the parking lot, desperate to find an open space, because he knew if he got there late for this interview, they'd never hire him. So he started to pray, "Lord, please let me find a parking space. I really need this job. If you help me find a parking space, I promise, I'll never go on another bender, and I won't stay up late carousing again. Lord, if you help me find a parking place I promise I'll never even drink again." Suddenly, miraculously, a space opened up right in front of the door, and he said, "Lord, never mind, I just found one on my own."

Proverbs says that a fool who reverts to his folly—like the guy in the parking lot—is like an upchucking dog. II Peter says,

...people are slaves to whatever masters them. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord

and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment that was passed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “The dog turns back to its own vomit.”

In history, at one time, probably during the kingships of David and Solomon, the Syro-Phoenician people had been introduced to the faith of the Lord, and then, after David and Solomon disappeared from the scene, and Israel split apart, reverted to whatever the religion of their latest ruler was. If their overlord worshiped Ba'al, the people worshiped Ba'al. If it was Moloch, they worshiped Moloch. If it was Mithras, or Dagon, or, the most recent favorite, the recently departed emperor Caesar Augustus, they worshiped him, or them, or that, or it. It wasn't the fault of the poor Syro-Phoenician mother. She was just part of the culture she was raised in. Jesus wasn't deliberately insulting her, or her daughter—he was referring to the milieu in which she and her daughter were raised. Why did people who chose not to follow the commandments of God expect the divine blessings of God? Why do they expect them today?

If we look at the issue, not necessarily with Jesus' eyes, but with the eyes of our own cultural situation, we may understand the point. Why waste opportunities on people illegally swarming over the border? Why drop a fortune on failing schools in dysfunctional neighborhoods? Why spend one dime of American treasure or one drop of American blood in

places where the natives have been murdering each other for 1400 years? I get that. I understand. But yet, there's this mother, and there's this little girl—and it's not their fault where they come from. It's not their fault. It's not their fault. *It's not their fault.* And Jesus can heal her.

And so, the mother, having just heard herself, her daughter, and her country referred to as dogs said, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the table.” Where do dogs eat crumbs that fall from the table? In the houses of people who let dogs near the family table. That sounds just like the kind of thing somebody in a dysfunctional living situation would do. If Jesus had been the model of propriety that I aspire to be (but am not), he would have said, “I don't allow dogs to eat around my table. I have high standards. What kind of trashy person do you think I am?” But Jesus not only understood what she was saying, he understood the faith that inspired her remarks. What's a dog doing around a family table unless it's somehow already part of the family? And then Jesus said, “For saying that, go in peace—the demon has left your daughter.” And the little girl was healed.

The mother approached Jesus in humility. She didn't demand. She didn't claim to be entitled. She acknowledged that she didn't deserve Jesus' intervention. But she still trusted him to be kind. And Jesus is kind—infinately kind, infinitely gracious. If we're shocked by Jesus' words in this scripture, never forget that he healed her little girl. He healed her out of compassion. Out of grace. Out of love.

There is an ancient liturgy, used in the English speaking world for 500 years, and still spoken today. It comes from the Book of Common Prayer, and it is said by the people before they share in the Lord's Supper:

“We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.”

So who are the dogs at the table of the Lord? We sinners are. We broken and dysfunctional people are. And it is by his love he makes us more than we would be on our own. He makes us part of his family.

Will you join me in prayer?

*“Lord Jesus, I know I'm not who I ought to be. I know my life is not what you want it to be. We know you have every right to expect more than what we are willing to give. You don't owe us a thing, and we don't deserve to sit at your table. But you have given us reason to believe that if we come to your table of grace with humility and in the spirit of repentance, we'll still be welcomed and fed. Thank you for inviting us. Thank you for making us more than we are on our own. Thank you for making us part of your family. Amen.”*