

“And if you greet your brethren only...?”  
Isaiah 53:1-6; Matthew 5:43-48; 15:21-28  
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Three weeks ago I sat in my mother’s living room. And with 111 million other viewers, we not only watched the Super Bowl, but also Beyoncé at the halftime show. Though I think about three minutes in we decided to play Scrabble instead. Now, apparently we missed something. For when I went online the next day, I read about what a stunning achievement it was and how her routine was not the dance of our hyper-sexualized culture, as was being commonly assumed and misunderstood, but rather one of defiance and power.

Really? Apparently. According to David Henson, former seminarian now somewhat known Christian blogger, if we perceived her dance as by the slogan of “sex-sells” then we were taken in by an illusion manufactured in our own minds, rendered blind to the genuine meaning of her presentation: namely that a woman can look a certain way without having to be sexualized; a fair and good point, to be sure. Elaborating, he made several illusions to a Hindu goddess named Durga and how, supposedly, Beyoncé was the intentional incarnation of her untamed substance; and more, that her gyrating body was a realized symbol of the things in life that might be sought after but not controlled.

All interesting and rather original ideas I’ll concede, even perhaps well-reasoned (if not over). But on review, I wasn’t buying it. I mean, what about that \$50 million Pepsi endorsement that hung over her head as she danced this defiance... was that also a symbol of the untamed and the uncontrolled; a retaliation against the powers that dominate and condition? I don’t think so. Moreover, what can we make of her announcing a world-tour the very next day as she rode the wave of publicity; or that her publicist tried to remove less-than-flattering pictures from the internet, allowing only the ones where she looked sexy? Hmm... yeah, I don’t know.

You see what you want to see, Mr. Henson. And even though that was his own persuasive point, that *we* saw what *we* wanted to see, that is, Beyoncé as a self-aware sex symbol rather than a self-aware Durga, I think Mr. Henson could be quite guilty of the same. For we do see what we want to see, especially in our judgment, or even affirmation of others. And too often we allow our interpretations of events and individuals to be principally formed by biased or traditional observations and rubrics. Rather than seeking true veracity and depth, we latch onto initial or antiquated ideas, turning hypotheses into laws, and conjure up justifications to support our flimsy-yet-now-trusted claims. You see this a lot in theology and scriptural exegesis, and even science for that matter.

So, following those points, I didn’t want to form too hasty an opinion of this fellow for I did appreciate his out-of-the-box paradigm and his challenge to see things differently and thus, I decided to read his essay on the Syro-Phoenician Woman, indeed the same Canaanite woman with whom our text from Matthew is considering this morning. You might remember the passage:

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”<sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”<sup>24</sup> He answered, “I

was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’<sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’<sup>26</sup> He answered, ‘**It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.**’<sup>27</sup> She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Well to Henson and indeed, many others, Jesus here is calling this woman a dog. And even though the Greek word is *κυνάρια*, which is a diminutive, meaning more like “little dog” or commonly, “puppy” it is nevertheless understood as a racial slur, as Jews in that time frequently employed it when disparaging their gentile neighbors. And as theologian Kenneth Bailey illustrates in his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, dogs were thought of like pigs, despised as unclean animals. They were never pets. So yes, even though he was calling her a *little* dog, to Henson it was just like a white person calling a black person “little negro” (or worse) and that there was simply no way around this. Our Lord and Savior, he who was said to be without sin, was not only unreasonably harsh to this woman, but he also hurled a racial epithet at her.

To Henson then, the entirety of these eight verses all boil down to Jesus belittling this woman, ultimately to have his racism corrected by *her*, so that *his* eyes became open to *his* fault, such that he then exalts her and heals her daughter as recompense. Even Jesus then had to be made aware of his prejudices and subsequently corrected of them, and therefore, as his disciples so should we.

And again I say a fair and good point and one that we should all take to heart... even if his premise is wrong and rather one dimensional -- this story is not so simple and rarely anything in Bible ever is. For when we open the good book, we must remember that these were stories written down two millennia ago, and thus not immediately indeterminable within our society today. Even in just the eight verses before us, there are cultural, ethnic, political, economic, linguistic, and religious undertones at play – and all of these are weaved into the undercurrent of our Biblical narratives, and often not directly made mention of. Remember too that these were books written and spoken aloud to people who would have been familiar with such contextual backgrounds. The same way if I were to write to you, “I’m flying out to Syria tomorrow to help those poor people, please pray for my safety,” you would immediately understand why I was going there, who I was helping, and why I was praying for safe voyage. But two thousand years from now if someone were to stumble across my letter, they would have to do some research to understand all of that.

So if we only read scripture at a level that doesn’t break the surface or only considers one of its many contexts (such as, Jesus uttered a slur!), then yes, we will often be horrified and just as frequently miss the point. But if we get beneath it and consider additional influences, not only will understanding follow, but I promise so will interest and excitement! That’s right, my fellow Presbyterians... interest and excitement. So get excited, ‘cause here we go!

The first thing to notice as we dive in is the literary context, namely Matthew’s placement of the disciples within our narrative: it is unusual says, Dr. Bailey. Typically across the four gospels, some story about Jesus will take place and **at the end** the disciples will ask a question of clarification. Here though, the disciples appear two verses in, just as the dialogue gets going and

before Jesus has even said anything and thus, our first clue that this teaching is specifically for his followers, just as much if not more so than the woman.

For consider also the geographical context of where this is taking place. Tyre and Sidon was a predominantly gentile region. And it is here where the unnamed woman, a Canaanite Gentile appears; Canaanites you might remember were native inhabitants in this land displaced by Israel's occupation. And thus, as you can imagine there was a hostility towards each other; and the disciples, being both Jewish and the occupiers, would have likely harbored prejudices against these *others* who their tradition and religion found to be unequal in God's grace.

And thus with the stage now set, the unnamed woman approaches Jesus and in public mind you, before the disciples if not even a larger crowd. She opens with the beggars cry, pleading with Jesus (whose healing power she must have heard about) to save her daughter who had become tormented by a demon. And in response to this poor woman's cry, he says... nothing. Wow. It is said in the Greek, "But he answered her not a word." Damn, how cold of you, JC! What was that about, bro?

And this is where we get into the cultural and religious contexts at play (if you're counting, that makes 4 now explicitly at work). Much like conservative Middle Eastern traditions today, a man was not to talk to a strange woman in public. Moreover, a Rabbi conversing with a Gentile, and a woman at that, would be an abomination. As Bailey notes, Rabbis didn't even talk to women of their own families in public. And so in saying nothing at all to this crying and strange woman, Jesus is purposefully maintaining the social protocol, thereby pulling the disciples and indeed the crowd into the lesson that is beginning at hand. *'See I'm going to act just like you would have me act. Are your eyes on me? Do you agree with what I'm doing? Okay good, now let's see where this takes us.'*

The disciples then affirm the cultural and religious barriers at work by screaming, "Oh, send her away!" To which Jesus then utters a peculiar and rather abrupt response: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." But why so abrupt and seemingly non-sequitur; what is Matthew trying to tell us? I believe it's because Jesus is not only exposing the theological context now at work (5) but he is also miming just how ridiculous his disciples' notions of the messiah are. In fact, in the Greek, a post-positive appears before the first person response, but for whatever reason does not show up in our translation. So if my translation is indeed correct, his line then actually reads "**For** I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." And inserting that one word helps to illuminate the tone of his response. It's as if he's sarcastically saying then, *'yes, send her away for I the messiah was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel, people who look like us...blah, blah, blah.'*

It's after this sequence that the infamous ethnic (6) slur occurs. As you can see then, when Henson boils this whole narrative down to just this one point, he's already missed five other contexts at work and the whole genesis for the true lesson which is unfolding!

This poor woman has been ignored, told to leave, and educated that the messiah was not for her but only an elect few. But instead of leaving or running away crying as you or I might do, she gets down on her knees and begs him to help her. And it's in that sheer moment of utter vulnerability that Jesus hits her the hardest with the line about his food (God's saving activity)

only being for the children of Israel, not for the dogs of a foreign land. Astonishing, really. But... rather than *dogs* being his slur and exposing his own objectionable racism, as Henson would have you believe, Jesus has instead fully unveiled the wrongful and shameful prejudice of his very followers.

Bailey says that Jesus employs a “reductio ad absurdum” and it’s as if he’s saying to the disciples’ *‘very well, here is what your prejudice really looks like. It’s ugly and vile. It takes a woman on her knees asking for help and first it ignores her; then it tells her to leave; and last it slaps her across the face with the hand of bigotry. Thereby throwing away God’s compassion and substituting it with misguided sense of your own entitlement. Oh, how you amazed will you be at your error!’*

For what happens next? This dog, this woman, this Gentile woman from a foreign land, considered worthless and without merit, emerges above their preconceived absurdities exclaiming, *yes Lord, even us dogs and lowly insignificants are still worthy of the grace of that descends from Heaven.* And boy, did she nail it! It’s then that the lesson is completed and thus, when Jesus testifies of her faith in front of his disciples, filled with their haughtiness and their rules. There on display for them: a man, a Rabbi, thee Rabbi talking to this lowly woman, and not only acknowledging and addressing her in public but even elevating her status in the kingdom of God and subsequently healing her daughter.

But as triumphant as this is, some people have questioned... why go through all that torment? Why put this woman through the ringer on the hope that she’d understand and indeed help in the education of his disciples? Well first, remember that these could just be stories, not necessarily histories, their purpose mainly to examine an important moral. Moreover, think of when a teacher or a counselor attempts to have their students or patients understand something that is critical. Just how much more effective is it when they don’t dictate the answer, but rather allow for revelation to manifest itself before their very eyes? Just think then about how much more powerful it was for these Jewish men of exclusive tradition and bias (indeed Matthew’s intended audience) that the moral of the story was facilitated by their distinct other: a Gentile woman! I dare say, as eye opening as when one of our own prejudices is exploded by a family member or close friend who turns out to be the very thing we claim to despise.

My friends, what a lesson this story is then for Christ’s disciples. Like the disciples of old, we are held to a special calling: to look beneath the surface, beyond our tradition and to examine all contexts. We are not to judge others by their appearances, their orientations, or where they come from, nor hold onto preconceived biases and convenient opinions for we are to help and consider each person as they are – another who might also be equally embraced by God.

*If you greet your brethren only what is unusual about that? Amen.*