### “For Saying That” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 8, 2024

**James 2:1–5, 17**

1My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality. 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here in a good place, please,” while to the one who is poor you say . . . “Sit by my footstool,” 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges? 5 . . . Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? . . .

17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

**Mark 7:24–30**

24From 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, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 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.” 28 But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” 29 Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” 30 And when she went home, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

Do you ever think about the relationship between faith and action? Maybe you don’t struggle with religious concepts during your day, or maybe you do sometimes think about such things in your quiet time. Today’s topic will give you some food for thought on this subject.

James’s teaching comes with very strong feeling. He insists that faith needs works, otherwise faith is just imagination. It needs to move beyond mere imagination and hope, and become real-life service. He says we must renounce favoritism and status-seeking. I think sometimes we are dazzled by wealth or fame, and when we show deference to the rich or famous, we are hoping that a little bit of their status or fame will rub off on us. Don’t look for that, James tells us. This is what Jesus would tell us, too. The New Testament is united against the idea of selfish status-seeking.

Now let’s look at the gospel passage. The woman’s response to Jesus could be considered sassy, but notice that Jesus rewards her after her remark. Is it because everyone is, indeed, entitled to some food from the table? Is it because he wants to reward her unselfish desire to save her daughter? Or is it even possible that Jesus admires the woman’s humorous mocking of Jewish pride by describing herself as a Gentile dog, yet deserving of some food from the table? I think the latter is likely, even though it means that Mark might have gotten part of the story wrong. I can’t imagine Jesus calling Gentiles *dogs*. It’s a remark many Jews would make about Gentiles, but it’s not the kind of thing Jesus ever said, if you look at all the rest of his speech throughout the four gospels.

In Matthew’s version of this same story, Jesus says to her, “Woman, great is your faith!” (15:28). Here in Mark, he actually rewards her for her bold remark. “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29). If Jesus rewards her for her remark, then I think we have to conclude that he doesn’t look down on Gentiles or call them names. Much more likely is that he and the woman are exchanging a wink and a nod, laughing at the common label of Gentiles as dogs. They are sharing a wisecrack. It’s not always easy to see the sarcasm in a biblical story, but I think we need to see it in this one.

He has no anti-Gentile bias. Elsewhere, we see him speaking admiringly of a Roman who showed faith (Matt 8:10). He took his apostles into Gentile territory “by way of Sidon” and into the Decapolis or what we would now call Jordan (Mark 7:31), and to the Gentile country of the Gerasenes, also in Jordan (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26, 37). Jesus quoted Isaiah about the Messiah proclaiming justice to the Gentiles (Matt 12:18; Isa 42:1). Unlike the apostles, Jesus is very open and friendly toward the Gentiles. It seems to come naturally for Jesus, not so much for the apostles. Peter has to experience an extraordinary vision in order for him to stop labeling Gentiles as impure (Acts 10:11–16). He later says God has *shown* him not to treat anybody as impure (10:28).

Showing partiality either for the rich or for Jews, is contradictory to the gospel. Eventually, the apostles learned this lesson, and Christianity spread rapidly through Gentile communities. After the Gospels were written, Gentiles who came from Phoenician, Syrian, Roman, Canaanite, Greek, or Gerasene cultures could read stories about their countrymen who had encountered Jesus. Jesus interacted with all the neighboring peoples. And of course, Samaritans and Jews could see themselves in these stories, too. People like to see a reflection of themselves in the gospels.

We like it, too, when we can identify with someone in a gospel story, although we don’t do it through national identity but through some feature or some experience in the story that resonates with us. Maybe you identify with the woman needing help and willing to push a little bit in order to get it. Maybe you identify with the father in a story a few chapters later who wanted healing for his son, but had some doubts, and so said “I believe. Help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). It’s okay to have some doubt; doubt is part of the faith-struggle. And Jesus healed the boy.

Whenever you see yourself in the gospel story, it’s good to imagine Jesus responding to your need. And, of course, our greatest need is to be assured of salvation, to believe that Jesus wants us to be part of his heavenly family and will draw us into it.

It is a good practice to imagine yourself in Jesus’ presence, asking him to speak to you, and his drawing close to you to answer. Imagine him really seeing you and understanding your need, and filling your heart with love and gratitude. You could imagine him hugging you, or putting a hand of encouragement on your shoulder. You can use your imagination to strengthen your faith, just as long as your faith is not sheer imagination. It must also manifest itself in action, as James told us.