### “Children or Dogs?” by S. Finlan, September 9, 2018

**James 2:12–18** 12So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. 13For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

**Mark 7:24–31** 24 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, 25but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.26Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He 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.” 28But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” 29Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter” . . . . 31He returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

The James passage has an intense moral message, but it’s equally intense in what it says about mercy. If you *show* no mercy, you will *receive* no mercy, and “mercy triumphs over justice” (James 2:13). Mercy is Godlike, and Jesus says this in the Gospel of Luke: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

Let’s keep this emphasis on mercy in mind as we look at what James says about good works. Faith without works is *dead*, he says (2:17). It might be that he is having an argument with certain followersof Paul who are stressing *faith* and minimizing good deeds. James insists that the proof of faith is good works. Faith, all by itself, does *not save*. We need good works, too, which includes mercy and kindness.

Mercy will figure in Jesus’ encounter with a spunky Syrophoenician woman, from what we would now call Lebanon. Mark has Jesus saying, “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” and she replies “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (7:27–28). Now, “dogs” was a nasty religious/racial put-down some Jews used for Gentiles.

So the passage is very strange for two reasons, that Jesus would use a religious slur at all, and that he would commend *her* use of it, with “For saying that . . . the demon has left your daughter” (7:29). I think Mark fails to recognize the *tone* of the conversation, and has misunderstood exactly *what* it is that Jesus is commending.

First, to use a prejudicial slur is *completely* unlike anything Jesus says *anywhere* elsein the gospels. On the contrary, Jesus repeatedly shows respect for, and interest in, Gentiles, and does not slander them. In fact, he compliments the faith of a Roman centurion, saying “in *no one* in Israel have I found such faith” (Matt 8:10). He tweaks and annoys his Jewish neighbors in Nazareth when he points out to them that there were many Jewish widows and lepers in the time of Elijah, but none of them was healed, only a *Canaanite* widow and a *Syrian* leper (Luke 4:25–30). And he tells a parable that contrasts a hard-hearted Jewish priest with a compassionate Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). He *opposes* nationalistic bias, and deliberately attacks it. Jesus makes salvation available to *all.*

At the end of the Mark passage, we see that Jesus continues on in Gentile territories, traveling through Sidon to the Jewish territory of Galilee, and then on east into another Gentile territory, the Decapolis (7:31). He must have preached to *many* Gentiles. And there are still more examples of his openness to Gentiles, which make it completely implausible that he would have uttered a racial/religious put-down—unless he was being sarcastic, and sharing the joke with the Syrophoenician woman. And that’s exactly what I think was happening. They are mocking the “dogs” label, and sharing the joke.

What Jesus admires in the woman is her sassy courage, along with her desire to have her daughter healed. Mark does not give the reader *any* hint that Jesus and the woman are being sarcastic. Like many serious religious people after him, I think Mark fails to recognize the *humor* in the exchange. I could be wrong.

And you may be saying to yourself, does this minister really have the *gall* to say that a biblical author made a mistake or misunderstood something? Well, yes. I am saying that *all* the biblical authors were human and fallible. We see rage and vengefulness in some Psalmists. We see rudeness and anger in the prophet Isaiah and in the Apostle Paul. We see differing lists of kings in the books of Kings and in Chronicles. And we see *lots* of racial or national prejudice in some Old Testament authors. Yes, there is divine inspiration behind the Bible, but it is transmitted by *humans*, and it bears the imprint and the slant of the human transmitters. Paul himself said, about Christian prophets, “the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Cor 14:32). In the same way, the Bible is subject to the biases or distortions of the individual authors. The apostles were all imperfect persons. Pastors are all imperfect, and *this* pastor is *highly* imperfect. Like all of us, I am a work in progress.

I think it is time to admit that everything that is touched by human beings is imperfect. We need to stop making idols out of pastors, or priests, or even the holy book. There is divine truth in it, but there also are personal flaws and limitations of viewpoint.

This puts a huge responsibility on *us*. We need to be discerning while we read the Bible. We need to develop a taste for truth, and a taste for Jesus himself. “My sheep hear my voice,” he said (John 10:27). We have to use our best reasoning and our best spiritual discernment, to try to figure out what *is* the will and the way of God, and what is authentically from Jesus. We need to be seekers and discerners of truth.

And we need to show mercy for other honest Christians who are doing *their* best to discern God’s way. None of us is going to be perfect, so we have to remember James’ lesson: “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty” (2:12). The law of liberty means we get to use our minds and our creativity in trying to discern God’s way. We get to be intelligent adults, not mindless minions following a dictatorial God. It’s the law of *liberty*, not a liberty-killing law.

So, *show* mercy, have faith, but also ask questions, do good works, and go ahead and let humor be part of your conversation with God. By all means, develop your conversation with God in ways that are authentic *to you*. If that includes some jousting with God, that’s fine. If it includes some dark humor about how harsh and creepy the world can be sometimes, that’s fine. Jesus sees *your* character, he sees your faith, and he appreciates your spunk.

If you are experiencing some confusion or some doubts about the Bible, it may seem like the foundations of the earth are being shaken, but don’t feel bad. It’s a normal part of religious and intellectual life, that we have to weigh, assess, reflect, and hope that we will get clarity some day, because we don’t have it right now. But you can always talk to God about *anything*. And it is only helpful if you being *honest* with yourself and with God. It’s alright to have doubts or questions. That’s part of fighting the good fight of faith.

What’s important is that you are being honest, that you are asking God for help, and that you are growing and learning, even if that includes having to *unlearn* some things. The Syrophoenician woman had *unlearned* the notion that she was some kind of inferior dog, and Jesus appreciated her spunky assertiveness. He did not feel threatened by it. Jesus would have us follow the law of liberty.

God does not feel threatened by us or our doubts. We are children of God, and God is our patient and loving parent. Just as we love and care for our children, so God loves and cares for us. God seeks to draw us into conversation and to guide us as we grow. It’s all about growth. Well, it’s all about truth. That is, it’s all about love. I mean, it’s all about the unification of growth factors, under God’s care.