

SOME PEOPLE ARE LIKE DOGS AND PIGS?**MATTHEW 7:6, 15:21-28**

Everyone tends to create a Jesus in our own image. There's the Republican Jesus. He's against tax increases and activist judges, for family values and owning guns. There's the Democrat Jesus. He's against Wall Street and Wal-Mart, for reducing our carbon footprint and printing money even if it increases the national debt. There's the Open-minded Jesus. He loves everyone all the time no matter what (except for people who are not as open-minded as you). There's Touchdown Jesus. He helps athletes run faster and jump higher than non-Christians and determines the outcomes of Super Bowls. There's Hippie Jesus. He teaches everyone to give peace a chance, imagines a world without religion, and helps us remember that "all you need is love." There's Suburban Jesus. He encourages us to reach our full potential, reach for the stars, and buy a boat. There's Spirituality Jesus. He hates religion, churches, pastors, and doctrine, and would rather have people out in nature finding "the god within."

Everyone tends to create a Jesus in our own image. But Jesus had no interest in being "politically correct." He got into trouble repeatedly for what He said and did. Jesus was deliberately provocative. He wanted to be controversial. Why? He knew our perspective on just about everything was and is hopelessly flawed because of sin's effect on our beliefs, our attitudes, and our behavior. If you've never been troubled or confused by something Jesus said or did, there's an easy explanation. You've never actually read the Gospels. It's inevitable Jesus will challenge some ingrained beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in your life as you seek to follow Him. Following Jesus is always about personal change and transformation from the first day we put our trust in Jesus right up to the day we pass into His presence. Are you a follower of Jesus today? Well and good! Be prepared to be challenged and invited to change not once, but often.

From now through the end of June, I want us to look at several hard sayings that came out of Jesus' mouth. Each week I'd like to try and answer three questions. Why are these words of Jesus offensive? Let's acknowledge why we find these specific words hard to understand. Then, is there an explanation that increases our understanding? Sometimes there's historical, cultural, and linguistic information that helps us make sense of what Jesus said. After all, we're going back in time almost 2,000 years to a very different culture. By the same token, Jesus spoke a language called Aramaic and His words were first recorded for us in Greek not English. The last question might be the most important one for us to answer. What's the application to my life as I try to follow Jesus? What personal beliefs, attitudes, or behavior need to be changed in my life if I live out the truth embedded in Jesus' words? So, let's get started today by looking at two passages where Jesus seemed to compare human beings to dogs and pigs. The first application to emerge is articulated in the following statement:

JESUS WANTS MY FAITH TO BE DISCERNING.

Here's Jesus' first hard saying. So, why are Jesus' word here offensive? Dogs are beloved animals in our culture. Many people treat them like human beings. But not in Jesus' day. Most dogs weren't kept as pets unless they were vicious guard dogs. Most

often they were scavengers, dirty, and sometimes full of disease. To call someone a dog was similar in our culture to calling someone a bitch. Highly offensive. We're kind of ambivalent about pigs in our culture. We probably like eating them more than spending time with them. Nevertheless, if you get called a pig even today, it's not meant as a compliment. Even more in Jesus' day, pigs were considered very dirty animals by Jewish people. They neither ate them nor had anything to do with them. Again, to compare a human being to a pig was – and probably still is - a major insult. For Jesus even to use language like this can be troubling.

So, is there an explanation that increases our understanding of what Jesus said and why He said it? He was likely adopting a well-known proverb familiar to most people in His culture to reveal a spiritual truth. What is holy probably refers to the sacrificial animals offered at the temple in Jewish worship. Pearls were items of value just like they are today. A pig doesn't know what to do with pearls. It would likely just trample them into the mud. By the same token, a dog can't discern it's inappropriate to eat an animal offered up to God as a sacrifice for our sin. Dogs eat anything and everything. It might even attack you if you tried to take its food away.

Notice, Jesus didn't call any specific person a dog or a pig here. Instead, he was trying to get a point across by using provocative, colorful language. Jesus did that often. For example, He once said, "So if your eye - even your good eye - causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand - even your stronger hand - causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." (Mt. 5:29-30 NLT) If you think Jesus was being literal, you've completely missed His point. Jesus does not want you to maim yourself! But His word choice got your attention, didn't it?

OK, so what's an appropriate application of Jesus' words? The earliest Christians quoted this verse to each other as a reason to put some restrictions around who was baptized and who could partake of the Lord's Supper. That's appropriate. It's not right just to let anyone be baptized for any reason. Baptism is a public profession of faith in Jesus. If a person being baptized just wants to draw attention to himself and there's no real commitment to Jesus involved, baptizing him is wrong. By the same token, a person should never partake of the Communion bread and cup because she wants to feel spiritual or part of the group. It's always and forever a statement about your need for salvation and your trust in Jesus alone to provide it. A restriction isn't about being mean, or exclusive, or trying to demean anyone. It's simply the recognition that if you don't adequately appreciate or value baptism or the Lord's Supper, you shouldn't participate in either act of worship.

But there's a wider application here. This verse follows Jesus' words about not judging other people. Jesus always rejected the kind of judgment that condemned people and wrote them off as worthless or unable to receive God's love and grace. But He never suggested all discernment or discrimination was inappropriate. In fact, this saying of Jesus is an invitation to practice discernment. He actually commended it in certain

situations. Just like some people don't appreciate opera (I admit; I'm one of them), some people can't appreciate biblical truth and don't want to hear it. Whether it's moral blindness, or spiritual hardness, or intellectual pride, or being a slave to cynicism, the fact is some people can't appreciate what is from God, about God, or of God. And if you try to bring God to them – like a pig they trample your pearl in the mud or like a dog they attack your message of God's grace and forgiveness.

So, what should you do? Don't waste your money by giving me a ticket to an opera performance! By the same token, don't try to force-feed the Bible or the good news about Jesus to people who have no appetite for it yet. Once or twice a year, Cheryl and I attend an Ohio State football game. On many occasions, as we stream along with thousands of other people toward the stadium, we've run into a group of sincere believers yelling Scripture, telling people they need to repent or they'll go to hell, and offering tracts to anyone in the crowd. I know they mean well, but I cringe when I witness their efforts. It's like throwing out a choice rib eye to a dog when a month old hot dog would satisfy it, or offering a string of pearls to a pig who will only trample them into the mud. The Christian faith will always get mocked and ridiculed, but sometimes we can invite mockery when we offer precious truth to spiritually unprepared people.

I believe in evangelism with all of my heart. I believe if people don't put their trust in Jesus they'll spend an eternity in Hell. But I also believe God has to prepare a person's heart to hear the good news about Jesus. I also believe that in most cases God uses personal relationships with Christ followers to bring people to Jesus. I also believe God provides the opportune moment and the right words when it comes to sharing our faith. I also believe we can unintentionally push people farther away from Jesus by not being thoughtful and strategic as to how we interact with people about spiritual things. So, just do nothing? Absolutely not! Ask God to prepare the hearts of lost people, create spiritually hunger in them, and bring some of them to you. Pray for those people. By all means, let people know you're a follower of Jesus. Wave some "faith flags." Pursue opportunities to build relationships and get into faith conversations. Live a godly, faith-filled life in front of them. Be wise and thoughtful. Be discerning in what you say about Jesus and how you say it. Two other applications emerge from another story about Jesus where He seemed to call someone a dog. Here's the first one.

JESUS WILL TEST MY FAITH TO MAKE IT GROW.

Let's read about it. What's offensive about Jesus' words here? We assume Jesus treated women equally and with respect even though He lived in a male-dominated culture. We assume Jesus had no racial prejudice even though, as a Jew Himself, He lived in a culture that despised and looked down on anyone who was not Jewish. In fact, Jews regularly called non-Jews dogs as a way of insulting them. We assume Jesus taught and believed that a relationship with God was available to anyone and everyone regardless of your ethnicity. We assume Jesus was always full of compassion, kindness, and gentleness. This story seems to challenge all those assumptions. Jesus appeared to ignore a sincere woman who asked for His help as if she didn't matter. Then, He seemed to base His refusal to help her on a racial, ethnic

reason. She wasn't a Jew. In fact, she was descended from the original inhabitants of Canaan – the Promised Land – who were ancient enemies of the Jewish people. Yes, He healed her daughter but only after she was publicly humiliated. To call a person a dog was a serious insult. Why does Jesus put this poor woman through the wringer? Jesus sounded harsh, insensitive, and more focused on fulfilling His mission than helping someone who needed Him desperately.

Is there any explanation that can increase my understanding? Yes! First, Jesus respected His Father's schedule for salvation. Meaning what? Because the Jews were God's chosen people, they received the privilege of hearing and responding to the good news first. With a few notable exceptions, Jesus limited His earthly ministry to Jewish people knowing full well that after His resurrection His disciples would take His message all over the world to every person. After all, He was the One who told them to go and make disciples of all nations. When the earliest Christians first began spreading the good news, they followed this same divine schedule. The great Christian leader, Paul, wrote, "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile." (Rom. 1:16 NLT) Of course, Jesus was never a racist! He knew His Father loved all the world's people groups and that His own death and resurrection would ultimately make it possible for everyone to receive God's grace and forgiveness. But His three years of ministry were laser-focused on Israel. During those years, He just didn't make Himself available to everyone. The story we just read is an important exception.

Second, Jesus deliberately used this encounter to teach His disciples something important and to broaden their spiritual horizons. Jesus had a purpose in everything He said and did. He wanted to give His disciples a foretaste of their future mission. Tyre and Sidon were non-Jewish towns outside the boundaries of Israel and were populated by people Jews regarded with contempt for centuries. Jesus wanted to plant a seed in the disciples' hearts they'd remember later: the good news was indeed for the whole world. Why take His disciples there unless He wanted to educate them? When Jesus first ignored this spiritually unclean, Gentile woman and her pleas for help, He was acting appropriately from the disciples' perspective. "Then his disciples urged him to send her away. 'Tell her to go away,' they said. 'She is bothering us with all her begging.'" (Mt. 15:23 NLT) They fully approved of Jesus refusing to help her on the grounds she was a Gentile and He was called to minister to Jews. "That's right, Jesus. You tell her! Who does she think she is asking You for help? God doesn't love Gentiles - especially not Canaanites. These people are just fuel for the fires of Hell."

But then Jesus got all impressed by this woman's answer, praised her for her great faith, and healed her demon-possessed daughter. Shocking! That was definitely not what the disciples expected. I can just imagine Jesus caught the eyes of those twelve men – now full of confusion - after granting the woman's request as if to say, "And what do you make of that?" I wonder if He stated the obvious. This godless woman just showed more faith than they ever had. This Gentile female showed far more respect and love for Jesus than any of the Jewish religious leaders ever did. The disciples were taking all of this in - watching, listening, and learning. Her response was a deadly blow

to their prejudices against both women and Gentiles. Why, strong, genuine faith in Jesus could show up anywhere even among the most unlikely of people!

How many followers of Jesus here today have learned that Jesus tests your faith? Oh, yes, He does! The Bible says, “For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.” (Jm. 1:3-4 NLT) In another place, God’s Word says, “These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.” (1 Pt 1:7 NLT) The disciples believed in Jesus, but their faith badly needed to grow, expand, and develop. What Jesus did for them, He does for us. He creates situations and presents us with opportunities to get our faith to grow and develop. Now there’s another personal application from this story we don’t want to miss.

JESUS IS PLEASED WHEN MY FAITH DOESN’T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER.

The written Word of God cannot convey to us the tone or facial expression of someone who’s speaking. For example, when Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (Jo. 18:38 NLT) was he being sarcastic, “What is truth?” or was he curious, “What is truth?” The words themselves don’t tell us. When Jesus said to the woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.... It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” (Mt. 15:24, 26 NLT), we can’t tell Jesus’ tone or facial expressions. I’m convinced Jesus said it gently and in such a way that it actually encouraged the woman to persevere and keep on asking. Jesus could definitely “blow up” religious hypocrites and those who opposed Him, but He was always compassionate to those who came to Him in need and asked for His help. Nor did He treat women unequally. The way He treated the Samaritan woman in John 4 was maybe the best example of the fact that Jesus was both gender blind and racially blind. All people mattered to God.

The disciples’ faith wasn’t the only faith tested that day. The faith of this seemingly undeserving Gentile woman was also tested to see if it was genuine. Yes, you can see Jesus’ words as a negative putdown, but they can also be seen as Jesus giving her an opportunity to achieve great honor. It’s like when a track coach puts his best runner in the toughest race. The purpose isn’t to humiliate the runner or make him fail. Just the opposite. It’s meant to propel him to a greater achievement – to give him the chance to run the best race of his life. Likewise, Jesus gave this woman’s faith a critical, tough test. It wasn’t meant to humiliate her or cause her faith to fail. Instead, it gave her the opportunity to expose or reveal the depth of her courage and persistence. I believe Jesus’ ultimate reaction to her persistent faith proves the point. “Dear woman,” Jesus said to her, “your faith is great. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was instantly healed.” (Mt. 15:28 NLT) He complimented her faith. He was overjoyed by her faith. He rewarded her faith by answering her prayer and healing her daughter.

The biggest takeaway for me in this story is the importance of having a bold, persistent, “don’t take no for an answer” kind of faith when it comes to God. This is an example of what’s sometimes called importunate faith. What’s that? The word “importunate” means “persistent, especially to the point of annoyance or intrusion.” This is “in your face” faith that isn’t afraid to be rude and isn’t worried about being polite. Now, here’s what ironic. Jesus loved that kind of faith back then and He still loves it now. God is pleased with it and blest by it when we, His children, show faith like this woman. I think sometimes in our prayers we’re afraid of being rude, of being impolite, or giving God the impression we don’t respect His sovereignty. We ask once and give up. We ask God to do something and then qualify our request by asking God to do His will. We pray, but often we don’t really believe God can or will do what we ask of Him. This little pagan, doctrinally ignorant woman went toe to toe with Jesus here and He loved it! It was as if she said to Jesus, “I’m not going to challenge your mission, Jesus. If you have to focus on Jewish people, OK, I get it. And it’s OK if you want to compare me to a dog. Even dogs get to eat the scraps the kids don’t want. It doesn’t have to be either/or. Lord, I’ll gladly be a dog if it means getting the crumbs from under Your table that only You can provide and which I so desperately need. I’m going to ask and keep on asking.”

She didn’t argue that she somehow deserved Jesus’ compassion. No apparent insult was going to stop her either. What did she have to lose by asking? She had this desperate, “I won’t take no for an answer” faith! An “in your face” faith! Magnificent faith! Marvelous faith! Unforgettable faith! Take note of how Jesus responded. Was He offended by her faith? No! He was delighted by her irresistible confidence in Him. She passed Jesus’ test – His faith exam – with flying colors. And, best of all, she got from Jesus what she wanted – the complete healing and restoration of her daughter. I look at this woman’s faith in Jesus and compare it to mine. My faith looks kind of mediocre in comparison, frankly. Exactly. That’s exactly why this story is in the Bible.

As I close today, there’s another possible application here I don’t want us to miss. Here was a parent pleading with Jesus for the spiritual deliverance of her child. Nothing is more important to godly parents or grandparents than if their kids and grandkids are following Jesus. Am I right? Let’s hope our children aren’t demon-possessed (at least, on most days!); nevertheless, we can often discern Satan’s influence in their lives in other ways, can’t we? What can we learn from this woman’s example? There was no denial of her daughter’s condition. It does no good to deny our child’s true spiritual condition. Don’t sugarcoat it. If he’s spiritually lost, he’s lost. If she’s being dominated by the devil, she’s being dominated by the devil. This woman prayed. She took the matter to Jesus. Her faith was bold and persistent. She would not take no for an answer. She refused to be denied regarding the prodigal child in her life. Ultimately, she witnessed God answering her prayer in a wonderful way. All of us can learn from this woman’s example. Whether it’s a spiritually wayward child or grandchild - or some other kind of great need - don’t be timid about demonstrating a bold faith. Great faith keeps on praying. Great faith prevails. Great faith brings great joy to the heart of God. Believe Him. Believe in Him greatly. Believe His promises without doubt. May we often pray, “Lord, increase my faith!”

One hot afternoon, a certain woman walked to a neighbor's produce stand to buy grapes. The line was long. And each person seemed to get special attention. But she waited patiently. When she finally made it to the front of the line, the owner asked for her order. She asked for grapes. "Please excuse me for a minute," was the answer. Then the owner walked away and disappeared behind a building. This rubbed the woman the wrong way. Everyone in line ahead of her was given special attention. They were served immediately. But she was forced to wait. And when she got to the front of the line, she was forced to wait some more. She was offended. She felt her neighbor took her regular business for granted. The longer she waited, the angrier she became. Finally, the owner reappeared. And with a big smile, he presented her with the most beautiful grapes she'd ever seen. He invited her to taste them. She had never tasted grapes so good. As she turned to leave with her delicious grapes, he stopped her. "Oh yeah, I'm sorry I kept you waiting," said her neighbor. "But I needed the time to get you my very best." How long have you been in line waiting on God to get to your prayer request? How long have you been waiting in line for God to meet a need, solve a problem, or open a door? Whatever you do, don't get out of line. Don't stop praying. Don't stop asking. Don't take no for an answer. Jesus loves that kind of faith.