

True grit: Mark 7:24-37; James 2:1-10 (Matthew 15:21-28)

by [John Ortberg](#) in the [August 23, 2003](#) issue

When I was in first grade, teachers assigned students to reading groups based on how well they could read. They would name all the groups after birds so that everyone would feel equal, but you could always tell how well you were doing by what bird your group was named after. There were the Eagles, the Robins and the Pigeons. The Pigeons were *not* reading *War and Peace*.

Ken Bailey gives a wonderful treatment of Mark's story about Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman in his comment on the parallel passage in Matthew. To grasp the point, Bailey says, it is helpful to think of it as a kind of test that is being given simultaneously to two sets of people, the woman and the disciples. Watch who ends up in the Pigeons group.

Matthew tells us that the woman approaches Jesus with the traditional cry of a beggar: "Have mercy on me." She humbles herself and adds the title "Lord"—a term she will repeat twice more. She calls him Son of David—she knows something of Judaism and is deeply respectful.

Jesus does not say a word. Matthew deliberately draws our attention to this point. This woman's daughter is suffering terribly, but when the woman appeals to Jesus with humility and reverence, he acts as if he doesn't hear.

She must decide if she's willing to persevere.

Meanwhile, Bailey says, Jesus is testing the disciples. He ignores the woman to see what they will do. "Send her away," they say, "She keeps crying out after us." They are exaggerating a little—there's no indication the woman approached *them*. But they're confident Jesus will do what they say.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," Jesus responds, apparently agreeing with them. "I was sent to Israel, God's favorites." Good call. Let's send her away.

Only he *doesn't* send her away, but watches the disciples to see how they will respond. Will any of his students understand that many are coming "from the east

and the west”? Will anyone say a word on behalf of the woman?

No. They all nod their heads.

The woman will not go away. In her mind she can hear her daughter’s screams. Maybe it is desperation. Maybe it is trust. She kneels on the ground and utters a single phrase: “Lord, help me.”

Now the tension in the disciples starts to build. Their theology tells them this woman is to be shunned, rejected. They would say just the same thing Jesus did.

And yet . . . they listen to the anguished plea of a heartsick mother for a suffering child. Something in them is moved—something must have been moved. This is striking at deep assumptions about whom God loves. Could it be that God is better than their theology?

Jesus speaks again—it may be that he is still facing the disciples. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Dogs were regarded as unclean scavengers, little better than pigs. The meaning is clear. Jesus is giving voice to their theology. It is one thing to have contempt for someone behind his or her back. It is another thing to hear the ugliness of our thoughts and feelings expressed outloud to a real human being.

Will any of them speak up for her? Will one of them love her? No. Not today. There will be other tests in days to come, and they will do better. But not today.

Jesus turns to the woman. Bailey notes that of the two primary words available for dog, Matthew selects *kunariois*—a little dog, a “doggette”—to soften what he says to the woman.

Still, her response is unbelievable. “Yes, Lord,” she says, calling him Lord for the third time. “But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She picks up on the diminutive form of the word “dogs” and uses the same form for the word “crumbs”: “even the little doggettes get the little crumbettes from the master’s tables.” Here is a woman who comes back at Jesus with grit, grace, even wit. She has an attitude. “You are still my Lord and master. Go ahead and make it look like you’re pushing me away. I’m not going anywhere. By all means, feed the kids. But I bet you have a crumb even for me. I bet you do.”

She just won’t give up.

Finally Jesus turns to face the woman. Finally the mask is off. For a moment Jesus conceals the great goodness of his heart but that moment is quickly past. The test is over. She's aced the final.

"O woman," he says, "Great is your faith."

The disciples look on in astonishment. This woman—their enemy, their inferior—has been given one of the greatest commendations ever bestowed by the one whom they follow so closely. It turns out that they—who thought they basked in the exclusivity of what C. S. Lewis called the "Inner Ring"—belong in the Pigeon reading group. And this pagan gentile woman is one of the Eagles.

"My brothers and sisters, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism," writes James. Jesus' followers are still tested in offices and cubicles, at school desks and cafeterias, at the boundary lines between nations, races and cultures, around breakfast tables and family rooms.

The story of this woman shows what we are all so slow to grasp: that the most desirable society in the cosmos turns out to be the humblest. Father, Son and Spirit are determined that the circle of love they share from all eternity should be ceaselessly, shamelessly inclusive. None are left out except those who refuse to enter.