

God's choice: James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

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by [Stephen E. Fowl](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

The juxtaposition of this text from James with Mark's story of the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman reveals a wicked sense of humor on someone's part. The passage in James begins with an assertion of the fundamental incompatibility of faith in Christ, the Lord of Glory, with partiality in human relations. It then goes on to list a variety of ways in which believers might typically display such favoritism. In Mark, Jesus seems to engage in just the sort of activity that James warns against, refusing to heal a very sick child because she and her mother are not Jewish.

This is a bit of a puzzle. On the one hand, James is uncompromising in his assertion that making distinctions between people based on their wealth is a violation of the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Such distinctions work in opposition to God's plan of choosing "the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." These displays of partiality also seem downright foolish since it is the rich who are oppressing Christians, dragging them into court and blaspheming God's name. On the other hand, Jesus initially refuses to heal the child of the Syro-Phoenician woman because she is not one of the children of Israel. In all other respects, this little girl is precisely the sort of person that Jesus delights in healing. She is suffering; she and her mother seek Jesus out; she and her mother are probably alone (or else the father and husband would have approached Jesus) and therefore marginal in their society. She and her mother seem to bear no responsibility for her sickness. Why should Jesus exercise such ethnic scruples here when he is, in fact, outside of the land of Israel? Of course, Jesus does heal the girl in this story. Nevertheless, we are left with a sense of unease that lingers long after the Gospel has moved on to other matters.

In this story, unlike so many other passages in the Gospels, we see that God's election of Israel actually has a practical bite to it that makes us very uncomfortable. Throughout the Gospels, but particularly in the infancy stories and in the passion

stories, we are repeatedly presented with Jesus' Jewishness and his intimate connection to God's ongoing dealings with the people of Israel. When terms like *Messiah*, *King of the Jews*, *Son of David* are used of Jesus, we can keep them at a high enough level of abstraction that they need not disrupt our settled, complacent gentile Christian identities. But when God's election of Israel becomes the basis for Jesus' initial refusal to heal this girl, we cannot avoid feeling indignant. Health care on the basis of election? Inconceivable! Our egalitarian compassion runs up against God's gracious choice of Abraham. We (complacently gentile) Christians are, of course, grafted into this family of Abraham through Christ. We are adopted members of a family, fully included yet living in a house that was not precisely designed for us.

We cannot fight God's election; we cannot overcome our gentileness. This is what is so galling. No amount of growth in virtue, no regimen of self-improvement, no pattern of self-discipline will ever change the fact that I am a gentile and God chose to save the world through Abraham and his seed. This matter is beyond my control. Recognizing this is the first step toward humbly and properly conforming my life to God's gracious working in the world. This seems to be part of what Paul wants to emphasize to the Christians in Rome.

I suspect that most people I worship with are far more bothered by God's gracious election of Israel—something we cannot control—than by James's admonitions about pandering to the wealthy and powerful. We are much more comfortable operating in the realm of power and wealth because it seems like something we can manage for our own benefit and even for the benefit of others.

The most charitable account one can offer of the actions of the characters addressed in James is that they were seeking to cultivate the favor of the rich and powerful to benefit the church and its mission. As James sees it, these Christians' attempts to be "players" among the rich and powerful have two results. The first is that instead of being players, they end up being played. The rich continue to oppress, litigate and blaspheme.

Second, in seeking to cultivate the favor of the rich and powerful these believers end up working at cross purposes with God. God has chosen "the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." Thus, James ends up addressing a dual failure. There is the failure to manage the wealthy and the powerful to the church's advantage. This admonition is not, however, a call to ever more shrewd and effective management. Instead, James calls believers to address their second and

more fundamental failure. This is the believers' failure to apprehend God's pattern of choosing and to fit themselves into that pattern.

The Syro-Phoenician woman understands that God's election of Israel entails Jesus' feeding of the children of Abraham. She does not argue with the fairness of God's choice. Rather, as if she had studied the Old Testament, she recognizes that such an abundant overflowing of grace must result in "all the nations being blessed." Instead of fighting God's choice, she attends to its importance. Her faith and her wit enable her to fit herself and her daughter into this choice—with miraculous results.