

Books and Covers

James 2:1-10; 14-17; Mark 7:24-30

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Don't judge a book by its cover.

We've heard it since we were children.

But we all do. Even here.

If someone came walking down the center aisle, tattooed up, piercings everywhere, red punky hair, in a crop-top and jeans, would we pay them no notice? Would we shrug our shoulders and not care? Or would we immediately stare at them, forming an entire narrative and negative opinion before even asking their name and getting their story?

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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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 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.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.
- Mark 7:24-30

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Though on the surface it appears Jesus is doing just that: *"It is not fair to take children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

But a surface reading, highlighting blurbs and incomplete quotes, is no different than looking at a cover page or a headline and saying "well, that's all I need to know in order to understand." I dare say, one of the great problems in society today.

No, we need to go further and deeper into the backstory to see what's up and going on here.

So let us first consider the geographical origin of where this is taking place. Tyre was a predominantly gentile region where its native inhabitants were displaced by Israel's occupation. As you can imagine there were shared hostilities between both groups, and each harbored prejudices against each other and their traditions.

It is here that the Canaanite woman will petition the Jewish messiah, who just verses before was condemning his own people as hypocrites because they were judging others over such things like how they ate their food (truly, something to get uptight about). Quoting Isaiah, he said of them:

*“This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”*

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’ – Mark 7:6-8

And so it’s fresh off that lesson that the stage is set and we arrive at our remarkable story. The unnamed woman approaches Jesus and opens with the beggars cry, pleading with him to save her daughter who had become tormented by a demon.

He responds: *“It is not fair to take the children’s food (or, Israel’s food) and throw it to the dogs (or, give it to people like you);”* almost as if parroting the very thing he just critiqued (*abandoning the commitment of God and holding to human tradition*). Why?

The Greek word here is *κυνάρσιος*, which means “little dog.” But don’t confuse it for a cuter rendering of “puppy” – for in context, it would have been heard more as a racial slur, as the Jews in that time often employed it when disparaging their gentile neighbors. As theologian Kenneth Bailey illustrates in his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, dogs were thought of like pigs, despised as unclean animals. They were never pets. So Jesus calling her a little dog was akin to a white person calling someone “little negro” (or worse). It’s really, really harsh. And so again we must ask, why? I mean, could Jesus really have harbored racist tendencies?

No.

Bailey suggests that instead Jesus was proving a point to the others in earshot. To his people who just heard his lesson about human precepts and doctrines, but didn’t understand. So instead of re-explaining it all again, he takes a different approach and names the hardness in their hearts, the bigotry and sexism in their minds, by using the very word they would use to denigrate others – *κυνάρσιος* (little bitch); thereby exposing their wickedness out in the open so that it in the open it could be vividly and surprisingly corrected.

And so offered the opportunity to do just that, this incredible woman doesn’t flinch, and replies with confidence saying, *‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’* Steadfast and resolute this woman stood up to the oppressor’s rhetoric and responded with strength and wisdom. Putting them in their place, and doing the Lord’s work for him. Oh, don’t judge a book by its cover!

Jesus in kind says to her, *‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’* Or better: thank you for teaching in but a single sentence what took me several paragraphs trying to explain before. Proving even to the Son of Man the sheer inefficiency (and stupidity) of mansplaining.

Don’t judge a book by its cover.

My friends, God's favor is offered to all. To dogs, Canaanites, and even to crop-tops. Towards everyone who is starved in this world for the crumbs of hope, for the good news. Each of us, no matter our appearance, are God's children, brothers and sisters, neighbors in the eternal community. For it is not what's on the surface that defiles. But it's what's underneath and what comes out -- how we behave, the rhetoric and content of our stories -- that disappoints, defiles, and opens us up to judgment.

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You know, I think one of the more interesting lines in our gospel text is right there in the beginning. It says Jesus *entered a house and did not want anyone to know that he was there.*

Kind of like what many of us are doing here in this house, if we're being honest. This collective house where millions around the world today find ourselves worshipping. Sure, in this house we do a pretty good job acting like Christians. We dress up. Sing our hymns. Say our prayers. And it all looks pretty good. On the surface. But don't assume that just because the cover says "Church" that there is actually a spiritual substance within. For too often it's just a lot of hot air. Hymns sung without believing the words. Texts heard without listening to the message. We might as well not even be here, or have anyone know that we are, if we can leave this house unchanged; unmoved towards the needs of our other, unsympathetic to the stranger and the homeless, uninterested in loosening the bonds of injustice, uninspired to clothe the naked and feed the hungry.

So please don't judge a book by its cover. For the title "Christian" is meaningless if our lives and actions don't add up.

James says that faith without works is dead. And you know what, James is right.

We can't come in here believing that we are vessels of light when out there we are orators of darkness. We can't say that our children are precious and express images of God's grace, when we can't be assed to cover our faces so to protect their lungs and their lives. Nor can we defend that this world was created with grand purpose and design only to live as to trash and rape it on the daily. And we can't go around parading like we are pro-life, if really we only care when that life is yet unborn.

Don't judge a book by its cover...

But what if that cover is photo-shopped and the book's contents ugly and mean?

Yes, my friends, we are deserving of judgment.

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The French philosopher and political activist, Simone Weil, wrote: *“God is not present, even if we invoke him, where the afflicted are merely regarded as an occasion for doing good. We have to bring to them in their inert, anonymous condition an authentic and personal love.”*

Or put more crudely, faking it doesn't cut it. We must be honest and real in our goodness if it's to matter. And in the end, what we say does matter. How we treat others does matter. How we live our lives does matter. But you know what doesn't matter? Most of the rest of the BS that we get bothered by. Like people's looks, or who they love, or how they eat and dress, and so on.

As James asks, *if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?* Really, what is the good of that?

Especially in this never-ending cycle of grief and despair, floods, fires, droughts and pandemics, we must leave this house of worship changed to do what matters. We must let people know that we don't just come here to escape and pretend, but rather to learn and grow, becoming more nurturing towards creation at large and charged towards supplying the needs of others and supporting them where their foundations are weak.

So please, I beg all who are listening, love others as yourself, and just wear the mask. Get vaccinated. Stop going to school meetings to spin and spew your venom.

Love others as yourself and stop being threatened by black and brown people; Asian and indigenous people. But actually listen to them, learn from them, be in community and fellowship with them, and acknowledge the rotten deck we have served them.

Love others as yourself and embrace people who simply love differently. Who love differently than you do; it's really not that hard people. I mean, what is so hard about this, and why are we making it so?

Love others as yourself and tend to the sick. Feed the hungry. Welcome the stranger and the refugee. Befriend the outcast, strengthen the weak, and for God's sake, love and support women, who for too long have had to listen to men tell them what to do with their bodies and their lives.

My friends, stop judging and start loving and doing.

By God reversing the trend.

So that others are surprised not by the meanness and emptiness of our story and pages, but by the depth and richness of our content.

Amen.