Connection to Unit Theme: While small groups are studying Pressure Points from the book of James, this sermon series is examining pressure points in the life of Jesus. As a human being, Jesus faced every pressure we face, and on a much deeper level. And since Jesus is the only perfect human being that has ever existed, we know that He never once caved in to pressure in any of the areas we are studying. How interesting that James was Jesus’ half-brother, which means He had a front-row seat to how Jesus dealt with pressure.

Introduction:
Begin by asking for a show of hands: How many of you grew up with one or more siblings? Ok. Now: How many of you will admit that you were your parents’ favorite child? (Expect some nervous laughter, and probably not too many hands going up). All right. Now, raise your hand if you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that your brother or sister was your parent’s favorite child (More laughter, more hands going up). See, this proves what an article in Time magazine a few years back pointed out. Parents play favorites. They won’t admit it, but they do. And if you were not your parent’s favorite child, you don’t mind letting everyone know about it, because the injustice of it still bothers you, even after all these years! And if you were the favorite, you keep quiet about it, don’t you? For one of two reasons: either you know it’s wrong, and you feel guilty about it, or you know you have a good thing going, and you don’t want to mess it up!

One way or another, we know playing favorites is wrong. It offends our sense of justice. All over our church this week, small groups have been talking about this danger of showing partiality to one person, or one group of people, over another. Our small group study has hit one huge point this week: “God does not play favorites, and neither should I.”

Now, we are in the middle of a sermon series that has taken the pressure points identified in the book of James and shown how Jesus responded to those same pressures. And so far, it’s been easy to show how Jesus didn’t get overwhelmed by difficult trials. We had no problem last week showing how Jesus didn’t give in to temptation.

And that’s one of the things that makes today’s Bible story so weird. Because on the surface, this looks like a story in which Jesus did play favorites. Open your Bibles to Mark 7:24. This ought to be one of those stories that makes you say, “What’s up with that?” Because even if you are just barely familiar with Jesus, this story just seems a little off. So let’s look at it carefully, and see if we can figure out what’s going on here.

[Read Mark 7:24-30, and bring out these points]

1. If Jesus were really playing favorites, He wouldn’t have been in this region in the first place. Verse 24 says that Jesus was in the region Tyre. This was Gentile territory—what is now Lebanon. This wasn’t the first time Jesus had been in Gentile territory (see Mark 5:1-20), and it wouldn’t be the last (see Luke 17:11-17, John 4:4). The Holman New Testament commentary points out that Jesus wasn’t necessarily going there to do ministry. More likely He was there to
get away from the constant persecution, and He knew that the religious leaders who were persecuting Him wouldn’t go into unclean Gentile territory. Nevertheless, it shouldn’t have surprised anybody that a Gentile woman would come to Jesus with a need in the middle of a Gentile region. Jesus certainly wasn’t caught off guard.

*Application ideas:* If we are really going to follow Jesus’ example of not showing partiality, then it isn’t enough to simply be welcoming of the people who “come to us.” Realize that Jesus crossed racial and gender boundaries to go to where people in need were. And in this instance, He wasn’t “on a mission trip.” In our normal, everyday coming and going, we will encounter people with needs.

2. *There’s dogs, and then there’s dogs* (v. 27-28). Let’s look closely at this conversation between Jesus and the woman. Did Jesus really just imply that she and her demon-possessed daughter were dogs? What’s all this about letting the children eat first, and that it isn’t right to give the children’s bread to the dogs?

- Notice that Jesus said, “First let the children eat all they want.” In this case, the children are the Jews. Matthew’s account of this same story calls them “the lost sheep of Israel” (compare Matthew 15:21-28). Jesus was always aware that God’s chosen people, the Jews, were His first priority. He acknowledged this to another Gentile woman—the woman at the well—when He said, “Salvation comes from the Jews” (John 4:22). Why does salvation come from the Jews? God’s plan required that God Himself would take on flesh and blood. So Jesus had to be born somewhere. He had to have a nationality. And God chose to set apart one nation—Israel—through whom all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). So Jesus wasn’t showing favoritism when He said, “First let the children eat all they want.” He was simply reflecting God’s great redemptive plan.

- Now, about that dog thing: The Holman New Testament Commentary on Mark points out that there were two kinds of dogs in Jesus’ day: there were the near-rabid scavenger dogs that roamed the streets that no one would get anywhere near, much less invite into their homes. But notice that Jesus said “throw it to their dogs.” These weren’t dogs without a master. Jesus used a diminutive form of the noun that would have referred to a household pet. And the woman was sharp enough (and humble enough) to pick up on this. See her reply? “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” These were dogs that enjoyed a place in the Master’s household. Before we get all hung up on whether or not Jesus was insulting this woman, realize that nobody—Jew or Gentile—ever gets to come to Jesus believing there is anything special about themselves. James 4:6 reminds us that “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” So if it takes being reminded that I am less than a dog in light of God’s goodness and majesty in order to receive God’s grace, I’m really okay with that. And you should be too. Clearly, this woman was, and she received from Jesus the healing she was looking for.

*Application Idea:* Is your pride getting in the way of receiving God’s grace? Are you willing to admit that you have nothing to offer, and deserve nothing from His hand? Only then are you really ready to receive His grace.

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3. **It’s faith that God favors, not people (verse 28-29).** Did you know that verse 28 is the only time in the Gospel of Mark that anyone calls Jesus “Lord?” This Gentile woman did something that no chosen Jew or even close follower of Jesus does in Mark’s story of Jesus: she acknowledges Him as Lord. That is the kind of faith that Jesus recognizes and rewards. He is not concerned with our status, our background, or our family tree. He is interested in our faith. In Matthew’s account of this same story, Jesus tells this woman that she has “great faith” (Mt. 15:28). Here’s another “only” we ought to pay attention to: the only times Jesus ever called anyone’s faith “great” in any of the Gospels were here and in Matthew 8:5-13. Anyone want to guess who was recognized for their great faith the other time? A Centurion. A Roman, Gentile, outsider Centurion.

**Conclusion:** Maybe God intended for this story to seem offensive to us at first. Maybe we are supposed to be forced to look more intently into it to understand what God is really saying. Because we know that showing partiality on the basis of someone’s race or gender or social standing is wrong. The truth is, this story probably doesn’t offend us enough. How often in our everyday lives do we exhibit the attitude that the gospel is really just for a chosen few? How often do our actions communicate an “us and them” approach? It could be as often as we fail to share the gospel with someone who is different from ourselves. This week, make the most of every opportunity to share the “crumbs from God’s table” with everyone around you—both the ones who think they are somebody when they aren’t, and those who freely admit they are nobody. One needs to be reminded that he or she is no better than a dog, and the other needs to be reminded that they have a place in the Master’s house. The gospel is for all, because God doesn’t play favorites. Neither should we.

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