

Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23  
Ps. 125 or Ps. 124 or UMH 846  
James 2:1-10, 11-13, 14-17  
Mark 7:24-37

### **Notes on the Gospel Lesson**

In the first paragraph of this lesson, Jesus' humanity is clearly seen. He has gone to the region of Tyre and "did not want anyone to know he was there." The last location mentioned in the text is Gennesaret, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Tyre is far to the north on the Mediterranean coast in modern Lebanon. Jesus has gone a great distance to get away from the crowds. He may have simply needed some time away from the constant pressures of his ministry.

Yet, as the text says, "he could not escape notice". A woman of the area, a Gentile, asked him to heal her daughter. Jesus' response makes many modern Christians uncomfortable. Could he really be that cold and unsympathetic? The surprising answer is yes. The clearest indication of this is in his use of the word "dog" in connection with the woman. There is no harsher insult in the Middle East than to refer to someone as a dog. Many will recall the April 1986 bombing of Libya by the United States. In a number of speeches prior to those raids, President Ronald Reagan referred to Libyan dictator Muammar Khadafy as a dog. Reagan use of the term was intentional and communicated to the Middle East America's utter contempt for Khadafy.

It should be remembered that Jesus must have been exhausted, both physically and emotionally. We often find ourselves saying and doing things completely foreign to our character. Yet it is the woman's response that is remarkable. Her gentle reply not only compelled Jesus to heal her daughter but his subsequent actions show that his ministry was enlarged and revitalized.

Prior to this encounter, Jesus had made only limited encounters with Gentiles. When he sent his disciples out in pairs, he instructed them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." After his encounter with this Gentile woman, he goes by the Sea of Galilee to the region of the Decapolis. A brief look at a first century map of Palestine reveals the dramatic change in Jesus' travel patterns. The Decapolis was a league of ten Greco-Roman city-states. This was an area inhabited only by Gentiles. Because of his encounter with this gentle Syrophenician woman, Jesus' ministry expanded outside the boundaries of Judaism and into the greater world beyond.

### **Notes on the Epistle Lesson**

Much has been written on the contrast between this passage and Paul's assertion that "we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ". (Galatians 2:16a) However, there is an incident in the life of Jesus that may shed light on the question of the relationship between faith and works.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is going from Bethany into the city of Jerusalem. On the way, he curses a fig tree for having no figs. The next day, the tree is withered away to its roots. When Peter remarks on the withered tree, Jesus tells him, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell

you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11: 22 - 24)

“Faith that moves mountains” is a common phrase in modern Christianity. The image that such a phrase brings to mind is telekinesis, or moving objects with only the power of the mind. However, there may be an entirely different understanding if we take into account the setting of Jesus’ statement.

Jesus and his disciples were staying in Bethany, a village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Jerusalem lay just to the west of this mountain. Without question, Jesus and the disciples were somewhere on the Mount of Olives when the exchange between Peter and Jesus took place.

In this exchange, Jesus refers to “this mountain” . Did he mean the Mount of Olives upon which he stood or could he have meant another mountain that was in plain sight of the disciples? A growing number of scholars believe that Jesus was referring to a mountain just to the south of Jerusalem, a mountain that is in plain sight from the Mount of Olives to this day. The name of this mountain is the Herodium.

The Herodium is an artificial mountain built by Herod the Great to commemorate a great victory won by his army in that location. (Recently, Herod’s tomb was discovered in the side of this mountain.) It was a huge palace fortress, reaching a height of one hundred eighty feet that was created by moving dirt from one place to another. Thousands of workers endured back-breaking labor to create this artificial mountain. Even today, with the central tower fallen into ruin, the Herodium is extremely prominent and can be easily seen from both Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

If it was indeed the Herodium to which Jesus referred, then his definition of faith is much clearer. Faith doesn’t mean sitting and praying that a mountain move from place to place. Faith means getting up, putting a shovel into the earth, and moving a mountain knowing that God will strengthen you in your efforts. Put another way, faith is not passive. It is active.

If this is the correct interpretation of this passage, then there is no conflict between James and Paul. Both would agree that faith is not simply believing. Faith is believing and acting on that belief.