



**High Expectations**  
**James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (September 5, 2021)**

How often do we expect something and look with anticipation to it to only be bruised by reality? Early 18th century English poet, Alexander Pope, once said: “Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.”

- Did you have plans in 2020 for an important travel and then COVID-19 happened, and all was put on hold?
- Did you ever go to drive somewhere, and it takes you twice as long because of construction?
- Did you ever do tons of exercise and get on the scale two weeks later to find the numbers haven't budged?

In his epistle, James expects the Christians to behave as such with favoritism towards no one.

In the gospel, Jesus expects to snick away for rest and not to be noticed.

The Syrophenician woman expects Jesus to act as the savior that he is.

Jesus expects the man to whom he has given the speech to be silent about it.

Unfortunately, merely expecting something to happen does not necessarily make it happen. This is what psychologists call “magical thinking,” the idea that if you desire something hard enough it may somehow materialize for you.

Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget noted that young children have difficulty distinguishing between the worlds they create in their heads and the objective world. As a consequence, children have the tendency to believe that their thoughts can directly cause things to happen — for example, thinking angry thoughts about your little brother can cause him to fall down the stairs or being angry at your parents causes them to divorce. Piaget referred to this as magical thinking and suggested that we all outgrow it by around age 7. Well, as many adults have hardly grown out of it, Piaget was obviously wrong. Often, Christians themselves engage in magical thinking when praying, and, when the desire of their prayer is not fulfilled (in the manner they were expecting), they get confused and perhaps even disillusioned to the point of giving up on prayer and a life of faith.

At other times, we create suffering for ourselves and others when we have certain expectations of them. The trick with expectations is to remain open to other people's response. In fact, what happens if we really expect something of other people and they are not willing to live up to the expectation? If we feel confused, morally indignant, and resentful of the denial, it means that we

have invested a lot of capital in the expectation and have turned it into a demand which, we further expected, was to be obeyed. If an expectation turns into a demand, then it leaves no room for disagreement and negotiation, and resentment and resistance build up on both sides.

Presented that way, expectations are agreements where one side has a strong preference of what things should look like or how they should turn out without the other party agreeing to it (or even know in advance about it.) There will be some giving-in and giving-up if the power differential is too great, with unhappiness, anger, and resentment and a desire to get even soon.

In today's gospel Jesus is tired and wants to get away from the crowds. Mark is not afraid to present the human side of Jesus, the cranky side. He needs time alone, time to decompress, recenter, and rest. But the demands of ministry are relentless, and he cannot escape people's attention not even in Gentile territory. Mark wants to be clear about this: Jesus has crossed geographical boundaries, but his fame has spread among the Gentiles as well. And it is in this foreign territory that Jesus is asked to cross more boundaries. It is here, in fact, that he is approached by a Syrophoenician woman. It's here, in other words, that Jesus is challenged to cross a triple boundary: a religious boundary; an ethnic boundary, and a cultural boundary. Is he going to speak to a pagan, entertain a foreigner's request, and acknowledge a woman? Does the Syrophoenician woman merit the little energy he's left with? Is she really daring to bother this foreign rabbi and miracle worker? She is only a powerless, insignificant, and inconsiderate woman, does she have a prayer? Can't she see he is tired and wants to be left alone?

According to Jewish customs, Jesus is perfectly justified if he wants to disregard her plea. She is not one of his own after all, should he care? He has no moral obligation to include her in the benefits reserved for the children of Israel. Should he get involved with her family crisis? Jesus is pretty much a man of his culture, and his Jewish upbringing suggests that the suffering and pain of a stranger do not matter. There is overwhelming suffering and misery in Israel, should he also add other people's misery to his list? To the Jewish people, hurting as they are under Roman occupation, she is still an outsider, one who is a "non-people", and her life is considered "less than" Jewish life. Jesus would be justified in thinking: "She is not one of us! I am tired. I am not going to waste my time with her."

If we accept an "Us v. Them" social construct, we know people tend to care only for their own. The thought is, we lean towards those who are similar to us for protection, for community building, and for survival. We tend to trust those who look and sound like us, those with whom we share a common background, those with whom we enjoy a shared understanding of the present reality, and those with whom we expect to build a mutually beneficial future.

Our survival instinct makes us question who qualifies as a member of our society, who is acceptable, who is "in," and who matters. Our survival instinct also blinds us to a more objective reading of reality, a reality that stretches from the past to the present moment and then on to the foreseeable future. This is when we engage in the redaction of history and tweak out what might be just too embarrassing and critical of our favored social construct and try to make it more in line with the fantasies of the dominant culture. If this weren't true, why are there people still flying the Confederate flag or hold on to symbols of a violent past masquerading it as cultural heritage? Why romanticize a past that was cruel, criminal, and illegal towards the Natives of this

land which was stolen from under their feet and towards Africans who were brought by force as enslaved labor to build a powerful economy? A resistance to acknowledge a sinful past creates all sorts of social roadblocks to enjoy the present and has absolutely no hope of building a future where all people in a pluralistic society benefit equally.

All the odds are stacked against the Syrophenician woman. But because she is extremely worried about her demon-possessed daughter, she becomes assertive and persistent in her begging: she ignores both his silence and social expectations. But what else would you expect? She is a protective mama bear and she is willing to risk humiliation and rejection in order to save her daughter. Despair takes your dignity away. I guess when you are left with nowhere to turn, begging is the next thing to do.

Jesus is reluctant to opening his ministry to foreigners even though he acknowledges the faith of strangers.<sup>1</sup> This is rather an awkward moment for Jesus. Just a few days earlier he has blasted the Pharisee for being too attached to the Tradition of the Elders rather than expressing pure faith, and now he is being strict about the Tradition himself not grasping the profound faith of the Syrophenician woman. Jesus seems stuck in his discernment, and he can't perceive just yet that consenting to the request would exemplify the direction of God's mercy meant for all the people of the world.

Thank God, the Syrophenician woman is insistent in her supplication. That's not the Jesus she has heard about. She is aware that she is a non-Jew and therefore not allowed to the bread reserved for the children of Israel. She requests crumbs trusting that there is abundant mercy and grace with God. Not too long ago, Jesus had fed five thousand men (not counting the women and the children) with five loaves of bread and two fish and at the end of the meal enough pieces of broken bread and fish were collected to fill twelve basketsful.<sup>2</sup> In a way, the Syrophenician woman is suggesting to Jesus what to do with the leftover crumbs.

It's her understanding of the magnitude of the mercy and love of God for all the people of the world that allows Jesus to acknowledge that he has been holding back. He has learned something new from her. Religious Jews worry only about keeping the Tradition to the smallest detail while a foreign woman is satisfied with crumbs! Her faith is so great that she is convinced of the unimaginable vastness of the grace of God, and she is ready to receive it.

Jesus knows she is right. So, he chooses to grow and finds no shame in changing his mind. Jesus backtracks from his prejudice and satisfies her hunger: there is abundance in God's Kingdom. That kind of faith opens the way to more miracles. Jesus crosses barriers that were never crossed before. It is easy to look down on those who don't look and sound like us or may offend our social sensitivity. But tribalism and prejudice have their roots in barriers that sinful people have deliberately created. All these divisions are not based on Scripture. As Christians, we follow the One who crosses boundaries and reach out to those in need.

After that episode, Jesus moves on to the Decapolis, a Palestinian region of ten cities practically settled by many foreigners and, therefore, Gentile territory. Here a new miracle follows: Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 17:11-19

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:31-44

gives the ability to hear and to speak to a deafmute. While the little girl is healed from afar, the deafmute gets Jesus' palpable treatment with plenty of details. The story ends with Jesus' defeated order to tell no one. But let's be real: Once the man can speak who can stop him? The harder secrecy is pressed, the more widely the good news is broadcast: the gag order cannot possibly work.

The last verse of the story is its punchline: Ironically, Gentiles speak highly of Jesus paraphrasing Jewish Scripture, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."<sup>3</sup> Again, while the Jews are concerned with the Tradition, Gentiles enjoy God's grace. The Messianic age is here, a life of grace, eternal life, is available to those who do not present any pretenses.

May our faith be simple and our prayer persistent. May we know the joy that only grace can give. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> See Isaiah 35:5-6