

## Why do you see my ethnicity, gender and class, instead of my need?

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Imagine going to a place where your intonation, language and style of dress speak louder than your being. The famous story of the Syrophenician woman found in Mark 7:24-30, reveals discriminatory tendencies seen in the overlap of attitudes to gender, sex and ethnicity. One's first question is: how does the practice of discrimination play out in this story? To discriminate is to create a social discourse through which bodies are accepted or removed, accommodated or rejected, and loved or hated. Back then and even today, this process is played out through the cultural beliefs and practices, which provide the ideological husk that enables certain privileges and practices to be maintained. What makes the story of the Syrophenician woman more interesting is that it involves Jesus in the role of the discriminator. In examining this story, it is interesting to tease out cultural and ethnic discriminatory practices and the liberating strands underlying this story.

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Seeing the woman from afar, one imagines that Jesus ruminated on two important questions: why is she alone and where is she going? Like most ancient patriarchies, the Jews understood that the private space belonged to women while the public space belonged to men. One of the reasons given for such conception of space was the belief that it "protected" women. Protected women from whom? The idea that public space belonged to men while private space belonged to women derived from a cultural practice that regarded women as weak and defenseless. Implicitly, anything regarded as weak has less social value. Such cultural beliefs that regard women as the "weaker sex" who require men's collective protection survive even today. Gender-based violence in South Africa and across the globe is sustained by the devilish belief that women are weak and their bodies available for men's exploitation. One can imagine that as the Syrophenician woman walked towards the house where Jesus was, she endured the male gaze and the cultural stigma associated with her body being in the public space.

After entering the house and observing cultural practices of greeting, she proceeded with her noble request concerning her daughter's health. "Sir, I heard

that you are a famous folk healer and I kindly request that you heal my daughter who is lying sick at home”, she pleaded. In many social settings, a woman’s request ends up as a barter with a man’s request for sexual favours. However, in this case the woman’s body as a sex object is not part of the narrative. Instead, what becomes a thorny issue is her ethnicity – she is Greek. Besides skin morphology, ethnicity is mediated through language, intonation, name and clothing, which become visible identity markers and the basis for discrimination against certain people.

For example, within the academic setting, one’s intonation, style of dress and name may be the bias determining whether or not one is hired. In a similar way to racism, ethnicity conceals a cruel practice wherein a particular group is privileged as the inner circle based on subjective categories, while other groups are excluded. Another example is the extended debate about language policy at most South African universities. While overtly the debate is about the preservation of certain languages as a medium of instruction, the discussion actually relates to racial realities in South Africa, in terms of which Afrikaans is predominately spoken by white students, while English is used mostly by black students. Ideologically, those who benefit from strong identity markers based on language, intonation, or clothing fight to keep cultural markers intact.

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An important lesson to be drawn from the Syrophenician woman’s story is that ethnicity can be used as the basis for others being given or denied resources, and being accepted or rejected. In this case, the woman requested Jesus, the famous folk healer, to restore the health of her child. Jesus’ rejection of her request was most unfortunate. In the story, ethnicity is used as a discursive and subjective reason for denying life and wellbeing. Ethnic categories create the divide of us-versus-them. This goes as far as labelling outsiders in pejorative terms. Because outsiders are different to insiders, they are viewed as enemies or labeled in denigrating ways such as evil, dirty, or less human. Such social categorisation has been practised for a long time; when unrestrained, it can be the justification for outbreaks of ethnic violence. In the case of the Syrophenician woman, on the basis of her ethnicity she is denied equal treatment.

Comparable practices can be seen in our health-care system, in which income is the factor that determines access to health care. Even when close to dying, private hospitals will not treat a sick person without visible income, and hence be altruistic. The unfortunate part is that owing to historical factors, most of the sick people who do not obtain access to medical aid are black and from an

under-privileged background. Thus in South Africa, in the context of health-care, the issue of income conceals several overlapping discriminatory factors: race, ethnicity and class.

However, rather than ending on a tragic note, the Syrophoenician woman's story concludes in a prophetic liberating fashion. After having been discriminated against on the basis of her gender and ethnicity, the woman claims an identity based on common being. She refutes Jesus' negative labels, asking "Why do you see my ethnicity, gender and class, instead of my need?" It is her prophetic protest that reverses the engrained negative labels. Discriminatory labels will not fall away until we identify their discursive pejorative origins and uproot them. For the most part, we are conditioned to see people based on race, culture and gender, and to overlook their needs. Consequently, instead of asking what we can do to help, our treatment of people is based solely on our understanding of their identity. The prophetic and liberating message of this story is that cultural bias should not cloud our judgement and thereby cause us to miss the Great Commission.