

THE GOSPEL IS NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Let's play a game. It's called "Matching Pennies." Imagine that you and I are playing individually against one another. Each of us has one penny. The rules are simple. At the same time, each of us will place our pennies on the table. If the pennies are both heads or both tails, you win that round. If the pennies don't match, I win that round. The principle is unambiguous: If you win, I lose, and vice versa. There is no way both of us can win or lose. Also, we cannot add more pennies or take away any pennies during each round.

That's a simple illustration of a "zero-sum game." It applies to most other games. Think about a penalty kick in a soccer game. Either the kicker scores and wins or the goalie deflects the ball and wins. Or think about two people arm wrestling. One person pins the other person's arm (unless they agree to a draw). You get the idea — a "zero-sum game" illustrates the reality and challenges of dividing up limited resources. Consider an annual budget — spending more in one area means cutting expenses in another area. Or think about cutting a pizza and making sure everybody gets equal sized pieces.

Unfortunately, all too often we apply the principle of a "zero-sum game" to life when it's not at all appropriate. Psychologists refer to this as the "zero-sum bias." An article about this phenomenon says, "People sometimes display the zero-sum bias when it comes to interpersonal relationships. For example, a child might mistakenly believe that they are in a zero-sum situation when it comes to the love that their parents feel toward them and their siblings, meaning that the love felt toward one child must come at the expense of the love felt toward the others. This is despite the fact that the parents' love is generally not a limited resource, unlike other resources that parents dedicate to their children, such as time and attention."

The article goes on to describe how the zero-sum bias can affect peoples' attitudes on a large, societal scale. "People sometimes can view membership in social groups as being zero-sum, meaning that belonging to one social group excludes you from being a member of a different group. People sometimes believe that there is an inherent zero-sum competition between different ethnic groups, which can cause them to develop negative attitudes toward 'the others' (*sic*). People sometimes view racism as a zero-sum game, meaning that they believe that a decrease in racism in one group will be balanced by an increase in racism toward other groups."¹

The apostle Paul and the gospel writer Mark would not have talked in terms of "zero-sum game" and "zero-sum bias." However, Paul's letter to the Ephesians and Mark's stories about the Syro-Phoenician woman and the deaf man with the speech impediment remind us that the gospel of God's love is not a zero-sum game. Perhaps

the greatest division in the Bible (Old and New Testament) is between Jew and Gentile. The distinction is easy to grasp: if you weren't a Jew, you were a Gentile. Remember the description of the zero-sum bias between different ethnic and racial groups? You might as well add religious groups to the mix (both in the 1st century A.D. and, sad to say, still in the 21st century A.D.).

Over against that ethnic, racial, social, and religious divide between Jew and Gentile, the gospel of Jesus Christ brings a message of reconciliation. One of the best examples from the New Testament is found in the story of Peter's visit to the home of Cornelius. When Peter the Jew entered the house of Cornelius the Gentile, he said, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." After Peter shared the gospel with Cornelius and his family, we read, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers [that is, the Jews] who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days." (Acts 10:28, 44-48)

So, it's a bit surprising to read about the Syro-Phoenician woman's encounter with Jesus in the region of Tyre. Let me help you get your bearings: Jesus has ventured up north from Galilee, his home stomping-grounds, into Gentile territory. Mark tells us "he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there." (Mark 7:24) It sounds like Jesus was looking for some badly needed R&R from his ministry. But his down time was interrupted by a woman — and not just any woman — a **Gentile** woman, a **Syro-Phoenician** woman, one of **those** people. She was desperate to get her little girl healed from an unclean spirit. So she was more than willing to break all of the religious, social, ethnic, racial, and racial laws and niceties.

She threw herself at Jesus' feet and begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And Jesus looked at her and said . . . "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27) Say what, Jesus? That's certainly not what we expect to hear from Jesus, especially in response to a heartfelt request from a desperate mother.

Listen, Jesus called her a dog! Unless you're a Wallace-Rose Hill Bulldog fan, I doubt you'd appreciate being called a dog, under any circumstances! Over the years, Bible interpreters and preachers have tried to spin Jesus' words in all sorts of ways, to tone them down, to rehabilitate them so they won't be quite so offensive. But there they are in Mark's gospel — "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." That certainly sounds like a zero-sum game, doesn't it? If you give bread to the dogs, the children won't have as much.

But, to this Gentile, Syro-Phoenician, "other" woman's everlasting credit, she is not deterred from her mission. Once again, she broke with the custom of her day and time and responded, "Sir, that may well be, but even we dogs eat the crumbs from your

children's table!" In other words, she seems to be saying, "The gospel is not a zero-sum game. I know there is plenty — and more than enough — to go around. Granting my request for my daughter isn't going to deplete anybody else's share."

Mark himself sends the same message as the Gentile woman. He sandwiches (pun intended!) these two stories in Chapter 7 between the feeding of the 5,000 in Chapter 6 and the feeding of the 4,000 in Chapter 8. The 5,000 were Jews, the 4,000 Gentiles. In both stories, "all ate and were filled and satisfied." And do you remember how the stories end? When the 5,000 finished eating, they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. After the 4,000 finished, "they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full." More than enough — more than crumbs falling off the table to the dogs below.

And Jesus recognized the truth of what the woman said — "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter." (Mark 7:29) While scholars and preachers and people in the pews have scratched our heads and tried to figure out why Jesus said what he did to the desperate mother, her response is a vivid reminder to all of us 2,000 years later that it's dangerous when we limit God's grace and love and the gospel message to this or that group at the expense of others.

The companion story in Mark's gospel tells about Jesus healing a deaf man who had a speech impediment. Although Mark doesn't explicitly tell us that the man was a foreigner and a Gentile, he might very well have been one of *those* people. After all, Jesus was traveling around the area of the Decapolis, east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee, home of many Gentiles. But Jesus doesn't hesitate to heal this guy who was brought to him by some other folks. It's interesting to note that no matter how much Jesus didn't want the word to get out, it always did. Somehow that Syro-Phoenician woman heard he was in a house in the region of Tyre. Here, at the end of the deaf man's story, we read, "Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'" (Mark 7:36-37)

Thank God that the gospel is not a zero-sum game, no matter how much we might try to restrict God's love. That's why the apostle Paul could write, "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. . . . But law came in, with the result that the trespass; but where sin increased, grace **abounded** all the more." (Romans 5:18, 20)

That's why John tells us **180 gallons** of water were turned into the finest wine at the wedding in Cana — 180 gallons! That's a ridiculous amount, way more than any wedding host or guests would ever need or expect.

That's why the ones that are sown on the good ground hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, **thirty and sixty and a hundredfold**. What a harvest!

That's why Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well (another woman who breached all of the barriers and stood her ground), "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them **a spring of water gushing up to** eternal life." (John 4:14)

That's why thousands of people could eat their bread until they were satisfied and there were still ***twelve baskets and seven baskets full left over***.

That's why the apostle Paul could write about the mystery of God's will, that "the Gentiles (that includes you and me) have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." (Ephesians 3:6)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, whenever we think and say and act and do things that suggest the gospel is a zero-sum game — that there won't be enough of God's love for us if ***those*** people get some, also — we can remember that Jesus Christ "is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. . . for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Ephesians 2:14-16, 18)

The gospel is not a zero-sum game.

The gospel is what we would call a win-win situation.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, may we always trust in your power and ability to heal and save and reconcile us to God and to one another. May our ears be opened to hear your Word and our tongues loosened to share your Word and sing your praises. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information about "zero-sum game" and the "zero-sum bias" is taken from these two articles: Indeed editorial team, "What is Zero-Sum Game? Definition, Importance and Examples," May 6, 2021 at www.indeed.com

"The Zero-Sum Bias: When People Think that Everything is a Competition," at www.effectiviology.com