

The Outsiders is an American classic novel, written in 1965 by author S.E. Hinton when she was just 15 years old. It was later published on April 24, 1967. It takes place in Tulsa Oklahoma in the mid-1960's, and it's about the social divisions experienced by young people of the time. The East Side is home to "the greasers" – rough and tumble, working-class, motor-heads who get rowdy and are generally rough around the edges. They're hardened by the circumstances life has thrown their way. The West Side is home to "the Socs" – upper-middle-class folks known for their affluence, nice

clothes, nice cars, and being “clean cut”. The opposite of being rough around the edges. They’re born into economic privilege and it sets them apart.

S.E. Hinton is said to have written the book because she was frustrated with a lack of teenage books that depicted real life circumstances – and also as a way to process through her feelings on a real-life attack that took place on a friend of hers in Tulsa.

I’ve mentioned the book before, and many of you shared your memories of having read it in high school English class which speaks to the timeless

truth is captures – separations among people are everywhere, both imagined and real; and when people don't stop to examine those separations they become entrenched and remain until no one really understands why they came up in the first place.

In chapter 3 of the book the main character, Ponyboy Curtis (Ponyboy is a Greaser), has made a connection with Cherry Valance (Cherry is a Soc) – and as they're talking they start to realize there are plenty of similarities between their "people" in spite of the differences they always seem to focus on.

As narrator Ponyboy says, “It seemed funny to me that Socs – if these girls were any example – were just like us. They liked the Beatles and though Elvis Presley was out, and we thought the Beatles were rank and that Elvis was tuff, but that seemed the only difference to me... I thought maybe it was money that separated us.”

“No,” Cherry says, “It’s not just money. Part of it is, but not all. You greasers have a different set of values. You’re more emotional. We’re sophisticated – cool to the point of not feeling anything. Nothing is real with us.”

“That’s why we’re separated,” says Ponyboy,
“It’s not money, it’s feeling – you don’t feel
anything and we feel too violently.” Then, Cherry
adds, “And that’s probably why we take turns
getting our names in the paper.”

I’ve never liked this sequence of events in
Matthew. It’s hard to deal with, but it’s also hard to
engage with Matthew’s gospel *without* dealing with
it. The conflict here lies in the same sort of dynamic
that exists between Greasers and Socs, or Israelis
and Palestinians, or Republicans and Democrats, or
Patriots fans and Bills fans.

First, we have Jesus and his disciples being looked down on and judged by the religious establishment – the Pharisees – for not ritually cleaning their hands before they eat. The conflict here is clear – the “upstart” and his disciples in tension with the religiously established elite of their time. Then we get Jesus’ pretty straight forward parable saying that what we put into our mouths just... ends up passing through; but what *comes out of our mouths* is what can defile us. Meaning words and actions carry more weight than shallow observance of etiquette. There’s a “wink wink, nod

nod” sort of element to Jesus’ parable here,
because the Pharisees are worried about what
foods people eat and what rituals they follow.

Then we get to one of my least favorite stories.

The text says Jesus left and went to the region
of Tyre and Sidon which would be regions of
modern day Syria – or Canaan as it’s often referred
to in scripture. While they’re there a Canaanite
woman approaches and starts shouting for Jesus to
heal her daughter from a demon.

At first he doesn’t answer. Then the disciples
say he should send her away. Then he answers that

she isn't part of those who he was sent for, because he was only sent for the sheep of the house of Israel and she's a Canaanite. When she persists he gets even more pointed and says it's not fair to feed the dogs with the food that's meant for the children... but she continues to persist with a retort that says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And this seems to be what gets a positive answer from Jesus. He tells her that her faith has healed her daughter and the text says that her daughter was healed from that moment on.

Jesus is calling people *dogs* now?!? What do we do with this?

We treat it just like we treat the Outsiders. A story written in a time where, sure, the people and specific circumstances were different from ours today – but there are eternal truths they were dealing with. We have to remember that the gospels were all written a generation or more after Jesus died – they weren't first hand accounts – and each gospel was written for a different audience, at a different time, facing different circumstances.

Each gospel shares *The Gospel* in its own way for its own time and its own audience.

The Mattheans, as we'll call Matthew's first adherents, had interpreted Mark's gospel in such a way that it led them to view things differently than the prevailing interpretation of the time – that the Messiah would be a *ROYAL* Messiah sent only for the Jews. The Mattheans had come to reject that nationalistic interpretation, and Matthew's gospel seeks in many ways to make it clear that *GENTILES* are also welcome into God's love through the gospel.

It's a plot device in the narrative of Matthew's gospel that seizes upon Jesus' humanity to make a larger point. In his human capacity Jesus is impacted and affected by the social and geographic divisions that the rest of the world spent so much time worrying about – Israelites and Canaanites were divided from one another, and why would an Israelite Jewish Rabbi help a desperate Canaanite woman?

But on the other hand Jesus comes to show that even the Canaanite woman can receive God's love and mercy.

Even someone who it's acceptable to refer to as a dog can receive God's love.

I'm still wrestling with whether this is a test by Jesus to see what the disciples will say, to see if any of them will intervene on her behalf – or if he really was just being that nasty that day – but regardless it's speaks to the power of God's love to make redemption possible in the face of the most *impossible* circumstances.

Because we are all made in the image of God. None of the divisions we place among ourselves hold up to the weight of God's love, and when we

are able to see through the eyes of God the vanish as if they'd never been there.

In *The Outsiders* as Ponyboy and Cherry continue talking she says to him at one point, "You read a lot, don't you Ponyboy... I could just tell. I'll bet you watch sunsets, too. I used to watch them, too, before I got so busy..." Then, a while later when Cherry's boyfriend and a car full of Socs find them all walking together, looking to pick a fight, Cherry breaks it up by saying she'll go home with "her people". Before she goes she says goodbye to Ponyboy.

She says, “we’d better go with them Ponyboy... I mean... if I see you in the hall at school or someplace and don’t say hi, well, it’s not personal or anything... We couldn’t let our parents see us with you all. You’re a nice boy and everything but...”

“I know,” says Ponyboy, “It’s okay. We aren’t in the same class. *Just don’t forget that some of us watch the sunset too.*”

Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.

Even Palestinian children just want to play and grow, and deserve the chance to do so. Their parents want to be able to provide that.

Even Undocumented people just want to provide for their families and to contribute to their communities.

Even People of color just want to be treated fairly and equitably and for people to acknowledge that their lives matter.

Even LGBTQ people just want to live as their authentic selves without having to apologize for it, or to have it called a sin or an abomination.

These shouldn't be controversial statements – but in our current American Christian climate they have become so; but they all speak to this same truth that Matthew's gospel presents to us today.

There is no child of God outside of God's love. It is we, who have to get outside of ourselves, to see God's children for who they are. Amen.