



Begging to Get In

October 18, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

MARK 7:24–37

PRINTED TEXT:

MARK 7:24–37

The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

—Mark 7:26

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

MARK 7:24-37 (NIV)

7²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

²⁸"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³²There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. ³³After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!"). ³⁵At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. ³⁶Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

INTRODUCTION

A. WHO BELONGS AND WHO DOES NOT

Who belongs at church? Most of us would say “everyone belongs” or maybe “sinners belong.” And we would be right.

But what impression do we often give about who belongs at church? By the way we dress or speak or act, we may give some the impression that only those who have their lives in order belong there. We may communicate that the church is only for people who are disciplined, wise, and strong. Those with worries or problems or hurts may get the feeling that church is not for them.

We are not the first to leave that impression. Jesus confronted it over and over in his ministry. He challenged those who thought that only people who appear righteous could belong to God. He welcomed those who knew that they desperately needed what only he could give.

Today’s text presents two people whose desperate need was obvious. One was a complete outsider, a person commonly thought to have no claim to God’s blessing. The other was one whose pitiable condition was unmistakable. Jesus used both situations to remind his disciples of his ability to help those with the most desperate needs.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

The first of today’s two stories occurs in the area of Tyre and Sidon. These two cities were on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, to the north of Galilee. In the Old Testament, Tyre and Sidon were notorious centers for the worship of the pagan god Baal. Jezebel, who married King Ahab of Israel and attempted to establish Baal as Israel’s god, was the daughter of the king of Sidon (1 Kings 16:31). Thus for the Jewish people of Jesus’ time, the region and its people were associated historically with the worst kind of paganism.

The healing of the deaf and mute man takes place in a similar area. Jesus meets the man in the Decapolis (literally, “ten cities”), a region to the east and south of the Sea of Galilee. For three centuries before Jesus, that region had been populated mostly with people who adopted Greek culture, customs, and religion. Though many Jews lived there, it was pagan territory in the minds of Jesus’ contemporaries. This was also the region where Jesus cast out the “legion” of unclean spirits from a man in Mark 5:1–20, the text discussed in last week’s lesson.

In Mark these events follow a long discussion that Jesus has with the Jewish religious leaders about what constitutes true purity and impurity (Mark 7:1–23). Today we will see Jesus meet two people who were commonly judged to be impure. How he responded to them is a continuation of his teaching on true purity. This is a demonstration of what it really takes to belong to the people of God.

**I. SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN
(MARK 7:24–30)**

The parallel to the story at hand is in Matthew 15:21–28 (Lesson 10 for the upcoming winter quarter). Reading both the accounts of Matthew and Mark side by side

allows us to capture details that one author includes but the other does not.

A. DESPERATE SITUATION (VV. 24–26)

24–26. Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and

did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.

Beginning way back in Mark 1:32–34, 44, 45 (Lesson 5), we see that Jesus cannot escape the attention of the crowds. Even when he commands silence about himself, he cannot keep his whereabouts a secret. That fact makes the action that follows all the more noteworthy.

25. *In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet.*

Of all the people trying to get close to Jesus, *a woman* with a demon-possessed *daughter* is one who stands out in the case at hand. She clearly comes to Jesus because she has *heard* that Jesus can cast out *evil* spirits from those oppressed by them (see Mark 1:23–28; 3:11; 5:1–20). We see that Jesus' fame has spread beyond the boundaries of the Jewish territory.

To fall at Jesus' *feet* indicates that she submits to his authority. This posture reveals the attitude that she will express in the conversation that follows. Her actions and words come from her belief that Jesus alone has the solution to her problem.

Mark often refers to demons as evil spirits, with the idea being that of uncleanness. Thus Mark draws attention to an important question: What is it that makes a person unclean before God? As Jesus explained, it is not what goes into a person, like food, that makes one unclean. Rather, it is the actions that come from sinful attitudes within (Mark 7:18–23). This *evil spirit* serves as a reminder that uncleanness is to be found with Satan. Uncleanness comes when we think and act on the evil to which he tempts us.

26. *The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.*

The fact that *the woman* is a *Greek* means that she speaks Greek as her first language

and adheres to Greek customs. Since the time of Alexander the Great (three centuries before Jesus' birth), the nations of the area have been dominated by that culture and language. This is so much the case that for a Jew in Jesus' time, all non-Jews can be loosely referred to as "Greeks" (example: Acts 19:10). She is also described more specifically as being from *Syrian Phoenicia*. Syria and Phoenicia are regions to Israel's north. The differences between the peoples of these two regions are slight. We can assume that many people identify their cultural heritage with both groups. But for Jews, both groups are seen as traditional enemies of Israel and as pagans. Though close neighbors in geography, they are worlds apart in their views of God.

So we wonder how Jesus will respond to a woman from this area. Will he turn her away because she is a foreigner who does not know the God of Israel? The stage is set for a dramatic moment.

B. UNEXPECTED RESPONSE (VV. 27, 28)

27. *"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."*

Jesus' words to the woman are blunt, even shocking. We should listen to their full force, but we should not exaggerate their severity. When Jesus refers to the children, he clearly is referring to the people of Israel as the people of God under the Mosaic covenant. Jesus' statement assumes that Israel has a position of privilege. The *dogs* in Jesus' comparison are clearly those who are not part of Israel, the Gentiles. In Jesus' time, some Jewish leaders refer to Gentiles disparagingly as "dogs." However the term they used refers to wild dogs that live as scavengers. Jesus' term refers to domestic dogs, a very different kind of creature that is not viewed as loathsome. So Jesus is not employing the kind of insulting language that some others do.

Further, Jesus does not say that “the dogs” will receive none of the food from the table. The children must eat *first*, and then the dogs may be fed. He does not say that the Gentiles have no share in God’s blessings, though he does say that the blessings are offered first to Israel. His words suggest that the Gentiles will also receive the food once it has been offered to the Jews first. This order in the offer of salvation is reflected elsewhere in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, the gospel is first preached to the Jewish people (Acts 1–9) before it is offered to the Gentiles (Acts 10). In Romans 1:16, Paul says that the gospel is given “first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

Still, with all these considerations, Jesus appears to be rebuffing the woman’s request. But how we understand that rebuff depends on what follows in the conversation.

28. “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

The woman’s response is remarkable. First, she accepts all the assumptions of Jesus’ statement: that the Jews have priority and that she, as a Gentile, is in a secondary position. Thus she remains submissive to Jesus’ authority. But she offers an added perspective on his comparison: while the children are eating at *the table*, the *dogs* are free to gobble up the *crumbs* that fall to the ground. So if the woman is indeed in the position of “the dogs” in Jesus’ comparison, second in line behind “the children,” she can still hope to receive relief right away, not just later.

What exemplary faith! The woman knows that she has a desperate need that no one but Jesus can meet. She is fully submissive to his authority and completely dependent on his answer. So she will cling to any means available to make her need known to Jesus.

C. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RESULT (VV. 29, 30)

29. Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

Jesus’ answer affirms her faith. She expresses the kind of trust to which Jesus consistently responds. Those who believe they have all they need are not ready to receive God’s blessing. Those who know that they have no means of helping themselves are the ones who can receive God’s blessing.

As we hear Jesus’ response, we realize that his harsh words may be something different from what we first thought. Elsewhere in Mark, Jesus shows that he knows what people are thinking before they speak (Mark 2:8). He also challenges people with difficult sayings and proposals (Mark 6:37). It is very possible that Jesus, knowing the faith that she will express, deliberately challenges the woman with his response about children and dogs. If so, then Jesus is acting for the benefit not only of the woman but also of all who overhear, especially his disciples. For any who think that by their position they have a special claim on God’s blessing, this exchange offers the opposite conclusion. Jesus is saying that he comes for those who know that they are weak and lost, who recognize that they have nowhere else to turn.

That is a truth that needs to be heard by those who believe themselves to be so far from God as to be beyond his mercy. It also needs to be heard by those who have been in the church so long that they have forgotten that they are sinners who stand by God’s grace, not their own goodness.

30. She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

We do not know exactly how *the demon* has affected this girl. In other texts, those who are demon-possessed are characterized by violent, self-destructive behavior (example: Matthew 17:15). Whatever her previous behavior, this girl now is lying

peacefully at rest in her *bed*. The end result is not witnessed by the crowd, nor need it be.

II. DEAF AND MUTE MAN (MARK 7:31–37)

Matthew 15:29–31 offers us a general parallel to Mark 7:31–37. But the specifics of the healing of the deaf and mute man we are about to consider are found only in Mark’s account.

A. NEED FOR HEALING (VV. 31, 32)

31. Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.

Although Jesus leaves the land of *Tyre* and *Sidon*, he remains in a territory dominated by non-Israelites. The man he is about to encounter is another whom some of Jesus’ Jewish followers might view as beyond the reach of God’s blessing. That Jesus exhibits special care toward him is an important lesson for those who count themselves on the “inside” of God’s favor and others as being on the “outside.”

32. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

The man is described as unable to hear and speaking with difficulty, if he can speak at all. The words that describe him should remind readers in the first century of God’s promise in Isaiah 35:5, 6 to give hearing to the *deaf* and speech to the *mute*. Mark wants alert readers to recognize this story as a sign that God’s promised salvation is coming to fulfillment.

Again, people recognize Jesus as a great miracle-worker even outside Jewish territory. If the deaf man is to be helped, only Jesus can help him.

B. DELIBERATE ACTIONS (VV. 33, 34)

33. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s

ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue.

Jesus takes specific steps in healing the man. First he takes the man *away from the crowd*. Now only the disciples will see what happens. Jesus apparently wants this action to communicate something especially to his closest followers. Second, Jesus does not simply speak an authoritative word to perform this healing, as he often does. Instead, he touches the affected parts of the man’s body. In doing this, Jesus uses a sort of sign language so that the deaf man will understand that Jesus is healing him. Merely speaking to perform the miracle will not do that.

With our modern concern for germs, we may be put off by Jesus’ use of saliva here. Some in Jesus’ time believe that certain people’s saliva has healing powers. One can imagine, however, that such cures are not effective. But what Jesus does here shows that he can do what others cannot (compare Mark 8:23).

34. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “Ephphatha!” (which means, “Be opened!”).

The fact that Jesus looks *to heaven* and sighs suggests that he shares with God a burden for the man’s condition. Then he utters a word in Aramaic, his native language as a Jew. This gives the command of healing to the man’s ears and tongue.

There are others besides Jesus in the ancient world who are regarded as powerful healers. Most of them refuse to reveal the means by which they claim to bring healing to their patients. But here and in texts such as Mark 1:40–45, what Jesus does to heal is described plainly. Jesus’ power to heal is no secret. So as we read this description of Jesus touching the man’s ears and tongue and using his saliva, we realize that Mark is stressing complementary ideas: (1) there is no secret to Jesus’ healings, and (2) that is

because there is no one other than Jesus with such an authority to heal.

The Aramaic word *Ephphatha*, meaning *be opened*, appears to be important on more than one level. In just a few paragraphs, Jesus will be alone with the 12 disciples, and he will ask them whether they have eyes to see and ears to hear (Mark 8:18). As we read about Jesus' disciples in Mark, we see them continually struggling to trust Jesus to care and provide for them. They do not yet "see" who Jesus really is or "hear" what he is really saying.

So as Jesus heals the deaf and mute man with the disciples alone as witnesses, he shows them that they need their spiritual ears opened as well. Only then will they be able to speak about Jesus as they are called to do (Mark 6:12).

C. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RESULT (VV. 35–37)

35–37. *At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.*

Once again we see that Jesus' actions are immediately and fully effective. There can be no doubt that he can do what no other can do.

36. *Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it.*

This is not the first time that Jesus commands silence in connection with a healing (see Mark 1:44, 45). Jesus is concerned that news about him not spread too widely before that news is complete. Prior to his death and resurrection, Jesus commands some to keep silent. After his death and resurrection, however, he sends his followers to preach about him to everyone.

The issue is this. Jesus has authority that belongs to God alone, as the miracles demonstrate. But what does that signify? We will understand Jesus truly only when we see the one who has supreme authority willingly giving himself up to die on behalf of sinners. We have the fullness of the good news only when we have the cross and the empty tomb. Until then, people may well misunderstand what Jesus is really doing.

33. *People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."*

News like this cannot be kept secret, however. So Jesus' fame spreads again. The words here remind us again of the promise of God in Isaiah 35:5, 6. Jesus is demonstrating that the day of salvation is arriving.

CONCLUSION

Jesus used his encounters with the Syrophenician woman and the man who was deaf and mute to show us the kind of person who can receive his salvation. If we imagine that we have good standing with God because of who we are or what we have done, we place ourselves beyond the reach of God's grace. But when we recognize how helpless we are and how deeply we need what only Jesus can give, he is ready to give us what we need.

The people who most needed this lesson in the first century were Jesus' closest followers. That is a caution to us! It is easy for us to become proud, self-satisfied, and self-reliant when we have known the Lord for a long time. We can become so accustomed to belonging to him that we forget how we became his in the first place. To receive his blessing, we have to get over ourselves and learn to trust him completely.

WHO YOU ARE, WHERE YOU LIVE

Location, location, location is an old platitude in real estate. During the real estate bubble in the early part of this decade, home prices over much of the U.S. rose dramatically. But certain prestigious locations saw prices escalating much more rapidly than others.

To keep tabs on all this, many folks found a new friend on February 8, 2006. That's the day that www.zillow.com went online. The site offered free estimates of property values—yours or your neighbor's. So many people went to the site when it opened that it crashed within hours! The whole phenomenon illustrated how fascinated we are with where we live, especially as compared with where other people live.

This interest in location can become a way to feed our pride—an “us versus them” mentality. There was a certain level of tension in that regard as Jesus interacted with the Syrophenician woman. First-century Jews looked down on her because of where she lived. But Jesus cared enough about her to test her faith with a shocking comparison. Do we value others as Jesus did? Or is their *location, location, location* more important to us?

AS IF BY MAGIC

Christianity continues to lose the strong place of priority it once held in Western culture. As a result (or, perhaps, as a cause), many Westerners have turned to the incantations of Eastern mysticism that supposedly control the forces of the universe. Others have taken up occultism and witchcraft, using magic to praise deities and attempt to manipulate people and objects.

A search of Web sites for such beliefs reveals a focus on casting spells for protection and for success in romantic endeavors. For example, an Internet testimonial for one book of incantations said, “I have recently tried some spells from this book and they worked. I tried one of the love spells. I now have a boyfriend who tells me he loves me ... but has been afraid to tell me.”

Those who dabble in this stuff are making two serious errors. First, the true God of the universe is the ultimate source of power. Second, he cannot be manipulated by incantations, etc. (See also Deuteronomy 18:9–13).

Jesus did not use a magical, occult incantation. Rather, he was using his own, divine power to command the man's ears and mouth to begin functioning as they should. When Jesus used such powers, they were always 100 percent effective—always. Since the mystics and occultists come nowhere near to matching this record, isn't it obvious whom we should serve?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. What was a time you heard a teacher or preacher say something that seemed harsh, but actually taught a valuable lesson?

2. How can we follow the woman's example in our approach to the Lord with our requests?

3. Was Jesus' response to the woman the same as what we call *tough love*? Why, or why not?

4. How can your church do better at curing spiritual deafness? How can your church make sure it doesn't become mute in proclaiming the gospel?

5. How can or should the fact that Jesus "hath done all things well" affect our personal commitment to excellence and the corporate commitment of our churches to excellence?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. What was a time you heard a teacher or preacher say something that seemed harsh, but actually taught a valuable lesson?

This response of Jesus has created much discussion. Some think that He was teaching a lesson to the woman (and to the disciples) by making it appear that He was going to refuse her.

Jesus did help the woman, so we know that He cared. Sometimes teachers, preachers, and parents use techniques like that of Jesus to make a point more memorable. But keep in mind a key difference in technique: a teacher or preacher may say something harsh before a group of people with less risk that anyone will "take it personally" simply because there are many people listening. But when saying something strong to one person (as Jesus did), the risk of the person "taking it personally" is much greater. Also, we do not have Jesus' divine ability to know in advance how people will respond.

2. How can we follow the woman's example in our approach to the Lord with our requests?

As a cultural "outsider," this mother showed great boldness in bringing her request for healing to Jesus. Yet her attitude was one of submission and humility. We are encouraged to "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, we are welcomed into God's holy presence. We know that our loving Father will provide for our needs. However, we must always come with reverence for God's mighty power and with a humble, submissive spirit by which we make requests, not demands. In addition, we can say as Jesus did, "not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

3. Was Jesus' response to the woman the same as what we call *tough love*? Why, or why not?

Merriam-Webster defines *tough love* as "love or affectionate concern expressed in a stern or unsentimental manner (as through discipline) especially to promote responsible behavior." Jesus' interaction with the woman had nothing to do with confronting any sinful or irresponsible behavior on her part (contrast John 4:18). Even so, there seems to be some overlap between the idea of *tough love* and how Jesus responded to the woman.

The Bible calls us to exercise church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1–5; etc.), and that concept fits the idea of *tough love* well. However, we should take care that we do not end up rejecting sincere seekers of the gospel.

4. How can your church do better at curing spiritual deafness? How can your church make sure it doesn't become mute in proclaiming the gospel?

The Bible has a lot to say about spiritual deafness (see Isaiah 6:9, 10 [quoted in Matthew 13:14, 15; Mark 4:12; Acts 28:26, 27]; Isaiah 42:20; 29:10 [quoted in Romans 11:8]; Jeremiah 5:21; 6:10; Ezekiel 12:2). Spiritual deafness is often intentional, as people take steps to block out the gospel message (compare Acts 7:57). Sometimes spiritual deafness results when people carelessly allow the “noise” of the world to drown out the gospel. The Holy Spirit is the one who cures spiritual deafness. He cuts through the deafness as we proclaim the Word (Romans 10:17). So we must make sure we do so!

5. How can or should the fact that Jesus “hath done all things well” affect our personal commitment to excellence and the corporate commitment of our churches to excellence?

The unstated motto for some is “only the best for me, but any old thing for God will do.” To this we can respond with this cliché: “Holy shoddy is still shoddy.”

Doesn't God deserve the best? We shouldn't encourage perfectionism in the Christian life or church—that would be a recipe for disaster. There are no perfect preachers, teachers, or musicians. Still, when we offer our service to the Lord, it should be the best we can offer given the resources available. In a sense, our commitment to excellence is an offering to the Lord (compare Malachi 1:8, 13, 14). This is a testimony to the world that we honor our God.

PRAYER

Lord, when we are honest with ourselves, we realize that we are helpless, needy sinners. We can only cry out to you for your mercy and grace. Thank you for Jesus, who came to bless needy people like us. In Jesus' name. Amen.