



“THE COASTLANDS AWAIT EXPECTANTLY”

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 Mark 7:24-37
 21st Message
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In the seventh chapter of the gospel of Mark we come now to one of the most critical lessons taught by Jesus to his disciples about the nature of the kingdom of God. This was the teaching that proved to be the most difficult for the apostles to accept, let alone implement. After they had given verbal assent to it and begun to live by it, more than once they faltered and lost sacred ground, even decades after the resurrection of Jesus.¹ And yet this was the lesson that would prove to be the sharp, life-saving edge of the gospel. If our modern world had been blessed with it there would be no racial cleansing in Kosovo, no apartheid in South Africa, no Arab-Israeli conflict, no divided Ireland, no Holocaust in Europe, and no need for our own Civil War.

This lesson probably makes up the most radical aspect of the gospel, yet it emerges out of what might be considered an antiquated debate about ritual cleansing (Mark 7:5). That debate had taken a radical turn when Jesus declared all foods clean, seemingly dismissing fourteen hundred years of Israel's dietary laws. The implications of that act now land with mind-blowing dimensions, leaving the disciples in awe. Following Jesus has taken them places they never thought they would go. In the same way, if we want to follow Jesus, we, too, must be prepared to go where he took the apostles.

I. Lifesaving Crumbs in Tyre (7:24-30)

A. A Departure to Unclean Territory (7:24)

And from there He arose and went away to the region of Tyre. And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice. (NASB)

Jesus needed privacy, perhaps because of his dangerous popularity, perhaps to “reflect upon the scope and course of His ministry” (as Taylor suggests), or to prepare for the next steps in the training of the twelve. They had experienced so much in such a short time. Isaiah's New Exodus, with its feeding and sea crossing, had taken place before their very eyes. Now it was time to withdraw and reflect on the next critical phase of their training; thus Jesus flees to the privacy of foreign territory, outside the boundaries of Israel.

This radical move shattered every convention and every notion of what it meant for an Israelite to remain “pure.” If the Jewish leaders were upset by the disciples eating bread with “impure” hands, imagine how they felt when Jesus deliberately transported them into unclean heathen territory, and then crossed the threshold

of a gentile home to eat and sleep. What happened there must have utterly amazed the apostles.

B. The Request of an Unnamed Woman (7:25-26)

But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit, immediately came and fell at His feet. Now the woman was a Greek, of the Syrophenician race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Jesus was seeking privacy, yes, but his fame had preceded him. For the second time in Mark's gospel he meets an unnamed woman. Her exemplary faith pushes the theological envelope past anything the apostles have yet experienced. She is a Greek, a Gentile of the Syrophenician race, not a Hebrew speaker. As such, she has absolutely no claims on the promises made to Israel, but she is desperate. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, a grave state of uncleanness. This mother learns that Jesus, the one who had brought cleansing and healing to everything he had touched in Israel, had entered the vicinity. Would he do the same for the daughter of a gentile, a woman of no status?

With a bold approach, seeking no intermediaries, she humbly throws herself at his feet and, with a persistent spirit, keeps repeating her request to him. Matthew records her plea: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon possessed” (Matt 15:22). “Mercy,” “Lord,” “Son of David,” “daughter,” “demon.” There is more theology in her short request than has yet to proceed from the lips of the disciples. The question is, How will Jesus respond to the request of a gentile woman who lives outside the covenant boundaries of Israel?

C. A Mysterious Refusal (7:27)

And He was saying to her, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Upon first reading, it appears that Jesus' response is surprisingly harsh. The allusion to “dogs” sounds very derogatory to our ears. Is this a racial slur? If it is, how politically incorrect of Jesus! But, as Cranfield explains:

The Jews called the heathen ‘dogs’, but it is doubtful whether Jesus is following that Jewish usage here. The diminutive suggests that the reference is to the little dogs that were kept as pets and not to the dogs of the courtyard and the street. So, by means of the parable of the difference between the claims of the

children of the house and those of the pet dogs, Jesus indicates the difference between the claims of Israel and those of the Gentiles.²

The children to whom Jesus is referring are, of course, the Jews. After the Exodus, Israel was known as “My son, My first born” (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1). God had chosen them by divine election, not as an end unto themselves but as a light to the nations. And the prophets said that once God had acted to vindicate his people after the exile, all nations would benefit from and share in that salvation (Isa 49:6). Thus, Jesus is pointing out to the woman the divine order of salvation: first the Jew, then the Greek. That is why, during his earthly ministry, Jesus gave himself to ethnic Israel—to preserve this divine order.

So, he responds to her entreaties: “Let the children be satisfied first.” But the term “satisfied” is the exact word that was used of the feeding of the five thousand (6:42). The children had eaten and been satisfied, and there was plenty left over. Calvin pointed out that Jesus intended “not to extinguish the woman’s faith [by his apparent coldness], but rather to whet her zeal and inflame her ardor.”³

Her response demonstrates how Jesus’ words did just that.

D. Unprecedented Faith (7:28-30)

But she answered and said to Him, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children’s crumbs.” And He said to her, “Because of this answer go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter.” And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having departed.

What a brilliant response! In her humility she has no trouble submitting to the divine order: the Jew first, then the Greek. She does not want to diminish Israel’s privileges. Yes, let the children eat first but, having children of her own, she knows that they often leave a pile of crumbs under the table, morsels that are happily scooped up by the family dog. Unworthy to sit now at the table of the main feast alongside Israel, she requests just one crumb of mercy from under the table; that will be enough. Jesus is surprised and deeply moved by her humility, insight and faith. He freely gives her one crumb, and with that one word her daughter is made clean. Imagine her joy, coming home to find her child delivered from the demon, safe and whole again. There is no greater moment for a parent. This far outweighs the joy of birth. A child once lost to Satan’s host, now cleansed, safe at home in a mother’s loving arms. The faith of this Syrophenician woman serves as an icon for how every future gentile will come to faith.

I wonder what impact this miracle outside the boundaries of Israel had on the apostles. Did it resonate inside them with the stirring echoes of Elijah, who had healed a widow’s son in this same region? Did they wonder if this was indeed the climax of Israel’s history,

when the Gentiles would share in Israel’s salvation? Did this woman’s faith flash Isaiah’s words across their minds, that when God’s Suffering Servant established justice on the earth, “the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law” (Isa 42:4)? Did they see this as the conclusion of the debate over “ritual purity” with the Pharisees and Scribes, where Jesus came not to cleanse mere foods, but people, even “unclean” gentiles? Did they see it as foreshadowing greater things to come as Jesus is expanding the boundaries of the holy land to include the whole earth? We are not told.

Before any response is recorded, Mark takes us back to the Decapolis, on the eastern side of the sea of Galilee. Once again, they are in predominantly Gentile territory.

II. Open Ears in the Decapolis (7:31-37)

A. The Return to Gentile Soil (7:31)

And again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis.

Bargil Pixner describes this journey with graphic clarity:

It must have been a long walk. At that time a road led from the region of Tyre and Sidon through Caesarea Philippi onto the Golan Heights. It was the road over which grain was brought from Bosra to both these coastal towns (cf. Acts 12:20). This is probably the way Jesus and his followers took to reach the Hipene, the upland northern corner of the Decapolis. From here another route (still traceable today) led down to the lake situated 200 m. below sea level. They would have reached the shore near Tel Hadar.

As Jesus came this time over the Golan Heights in to the Decapolis, he soon realized that he was no longer a stranger here, for the man he had healed at Kursi had praised him everywhere.⁴

B. The Request for a New Creation (7:32-37)

And they brought to Him one who was deaf and spoke with difficulty, and they entreated Him to lay His hand upon him. And He took him aside from the multitude by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, “Ephphatha!” that is, “Be opened!” And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly. And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it. And they were utterly astonished, saying, “He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.”

Recall that the last time Jesus was in this region he had not been well received. Following the healing of the Gerasene demoniac he had departed, leaving two thou-

sand drowned pigs in his wake. The inhabitants, terrified, and threatened with severe economic loss, had asked Jesus to leave their region. He submitted to their request, but before he did so, he planted one tiny “mustard seed” in that hostile soil to spread the good news of his healing. That seed took root in the ten predominantly Gentile cities known as the Decapolis.

Now, upon his return, he is welcomed and sought out as an honored guest. This should be a great encouragement to us. How instructive it is to learn that God’s kingdom grows by the power of his word, without any coercion on our part. A man who is deaf and has a speech impediment is brought to him, and Jesus is asked to lay his hands upon him. The verb “spoke with difficulty” (*mogilalon*: “the inarticulate grunts of a deaf mute”⁵) is very rare. It occurs but here in the N.T. and once in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures), where Isaiah predicts that in the Messianic age, “the tongue of the *dumb* will shout for joy” (Isa 35:6). What Israel longed for has now arrived in Jesus.

Jesus removes the man from the crowd and, in secluded privacy, his actions closely mirror those of the original creation of man (Gen 2:7). First, he spits; next, he touches his finger in the spittle and places it in the man’s ears; then he lifts his eyes to heaven and, with a deep groan, prays and gives the order, “Ephphatha,” an Aramaic term meaning, “Be opened.” Cranfield comments that the verb means “be opened” or “be released.” “The idea is not of the particular part of the person being opened, but of the whole person being opened or released”⁶ (and often in the context of being liberated from Satan’s bondage, Luke 13:16; Mark 3:27). This may suggest that the man’s deafness and dumbness may have been more than a physical impediment, and had deeper spiritual implications. With but one touch and one word the man’s ears are completely opened to hear and his tongue liberated to speak plainly.

Jesus expresses the desire that this news not be spread. He intended the event to be primarily a private tutorial for the apostles. Therefore he gives the man strict orders to tell no one. But the more emphatic his plea for silence, the more openly the man preaches the good news. The astonished crowds respond with the accolade, “He has done all things well” (“perhaps an echo of Genesis 1:31,” Cranfield⁷). What a marked contrast to their earlier reaction of fear, and demand that Jesus leave their region.

The miracle has great significance, since the Jews considered the ear to be the primary organ of spiritual receptivity, as we observe in that most fundamental command to Israel, “*Hear* O Israel...” (Deut 6:4). God’s people were predominantly a people of the ear. “Hearing” meant to be “receptive,” “attentive” and “obedient” to God’s revelation. This is why hearing even preceded “seeing.” Yet in their sad history, Israel often paid a deaf ear to God’s commandments, turning to

idolatry despite the persistent warnings of the prophets. The tragedy of idolatry, however, according to the psalmist, is that

They have mouths, but they cannot speak;
They have eyes, but they cannot see;
They have ears, but they cannot hear...
Those who make them will become like them,
Everyone who trusts in them. (Psa 115:5, 6, 8)

Now, sadly, Israel had become deaf and blind in exile. But Isaiah spoke of a new day when God would come to save them and they would see the Glory of Yahweh. In that day,

“...the ears of the deaf will be unstopped...
And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy...
...And a highway will be there, a roadway,
and it will be called “the highway of holiness”...
And the ransomed of the Lord will return,
And come with joyful shouting to Zion,
With everlasting joy upon their heads.
They will find gladness and joy,
And sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (Isa 35: 5-6,
8, 10)

God himself would come into Israel’s midst and heal her deafness so that after her exile, his people would be miraculously obedient. They would finally “hear” God’s word, be attentive to it, and obey it. Such obedience would wrap Israel in a mantle of joy.

The amazing thing about our story is that the very thing which God predicted he would do for Israel, the apostles were even now observing Jesus doing outside the borders of Israel. It was just as Isaiah had spoken:

“It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob,
and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations,
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the
earth.” (Isa 49:6)

Returning to the opening debate, we discover that Jesus did not come to violate laws of holiness, rather, he intensified holiness. The holiness which he gives by the Spirit is so powerful God’s people no longer have to retreat behind external rites of purity or insulate themselves in their holy lands from external threats of impurity. Now they can venture forth into the darkest dungeons of depravity and by the power of the Spirit “cleanse” those they come into contact with. As Tom Wright explains: “In the history of the early church, the forsaking of the Old Testament food laws by Jewish Christians opened the door to mass evangelism of the Gentiles; for Jewish Christians could then mingle freely with Gentiles, eat their food, and not require them to change their eating habits, a requirement that would have sharply reduced the number of Gentile converts (cf. Acts 10:1-11:18; 11:19-26;).”⁸

Yet this was difficult to accept, and even harder to implement. It took extraordinary vision for Peter to fol-

low in Jesus' steps into Gentile territory (Acts 10). Recall God's emphatic words, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unclean" (Acts 10:15). Yet, even later, Peter fell back under pressure from the traditionalists and withdrew from table fellowship with gentiles until Paul challenged him to his face (Gal 2:11-14).

III. "Go unto all nations"

The questions for us are, Do we really believe it? Do we live like it? Let me conclude by asking a few penetrating questions.

As evil escalates in our world, do we run in fear and insulate ourselves behind Christian shelters, or do we see moral breakdown as a sign that God is preparing people who are desperate and, in dire need, are on the verge of acquiring faith? Do we run or risk, venturing forth to places where the desperate congregate?

As moral boundaries degenerate in our world, do we retreat behind apologetics and ethical disgust, or are we brave enough to cross foreign boundaries and offer sinners a few crumbs?

Do we feel threatened when we have a sense of being overrun by new cultures moving into our area, or are we excited, knowing that God is at work in a new way?

How do we view the work place? As a dark repressive place to make money or as a natural highway to make relational contacts? How do we view business trips? As times to be tempted and overrun by the lusts of the world when we are alone in our hotel rooms, or as occasions when people are open to letting down walls of insecurity and sharing the deep things of the heart over a meal? Do you take your meals with non-Christians? In light of this text, work is the primary arena of ministry, and business trips are in fact missions adventures funded by your employers. And if you respond that work is more like a prison, I would remind you that much of the ministry of the early church took place in prisons. Actually, most of the New Testament was written in prisons.

Parents, if you are home schooling your children, in one respect you have a great advantage. You can provide a Christian world view for them in every subject and shape their souls spiritually. But remember, as they get older you must provide natural highways for them for non-Christian friendships so they can enter into full discipleship and participate in this new creation.

To those who have children in public schools, let me say you can't just turn children loose and then overreact when they encounter evil influences. We have to walk alongside them, passionately love their friends, and model caring for unbelievers. Involvement is much better than overreacting because of injustice suffered. This is holy contact in love. So, my advice is, volunteer at your schools. There are all kinds of opportunities in coaching, serving and teaching.

To students, I would say that the best way to grow spiritually is to leave home. If possible, study overseas. To couples, I say, take opportunities to live and work overseas and let your companies pay for it.

The best way to remain pure and live on the "Highway of Holiness" (Isa 35:8) is to actively reach out and love non-believers. The world has never been more desperate. All they need is but a few crumbs.

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1. Compare Acts 10:1-16 with Galatians 2:11-12.
2. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959) 248.
3. Cranfield.
4. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus Through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 80.
5. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 392.
6. Cranfield, 252
7. Cranfield, 253.
8. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).