

NCBC Youth Group
December 15, 2019

A SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN AND A DEAF MAN
MARK 7:24-37

Introduction

The question we answered last week was: What defiles a person? Is it something external or something internal? Jesus said that spiritual defilement is not external (7:18-19); it is internal (7:20-23). It comes from our heart, and because our hearts are corrupt, what flows from it is also corrupt. Unless we are given a new heart—spiritually speaking—we can do no amount of external works to earn righteousness.

The Pharisees believed erroneously that it was external. For instance, they taught that failing to perform ceremonial hand washings before eating would lead to spiritual defilement (7:2-4). They also observed many other man-made regulations and traditions, to the point where they elevated their man-made traditions above the word of God (7:13).

One thing we notice is the notion of the “clean” and the “unclean.” To encounter something that is unclean would lead to spiritual defilement. We saw the example of ceremonially washing their hands, which by the way, was not for sanitary purposes at all. There are also clean and unclean foods, and if you ate something unclean, you would be spiritually defiled. Not surprisingly, there are also clean and unclean people.

Jew and Gentile

Many things can make a person unclean. We saw, for example, the woman with the bleeding disorder in Mark 5:25-34 was considered unclean (cf. Lev. 15:25-27). Anyone she touched would also be unclean for a specified period of time. But in light of our text today, where Jesus travels to Gentile regions, I want us to consider another group of people that was considered unclean: Gentiles.

A Gentile is simply someone who is not a Jew, so most—if not all—of us are Gentiles. Jews had an unfavorable view of Gentiles. The Jews are God’s chosen people, and as such, they considered Gentiles to be unclean, a people who were consigned to divine judgment.¹ However, this hatred toward Gentiles is unfounded. The Jews were chosen by God as a people who would be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). They were supposed to be

¹ John MacArthur, *Mark 1-6 The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 362.

a blessing to all the families of the earth, including Gentiles (Genesis 12:3). They were supposed to be a light to the world.

But they largely failed at their duty to bring the salvation message to the world. Instead, they resented Gentiles, treating them as enemies and not their mission field. The prophet Jonah is an excellent illustration. He was called by God to preach to the Ninevites (Jonah 1:2), who were Gentiles, but we all know that he refused to go and fled (Jonah 1:3). Why did he run away? Because the mission was too difficult and people too hostile? No, because he didn't want the Ninevites to hear the message and repent. In fact, when Ninevites repented, Jonah was angry (Jonah 4:1). He didn't want them to benefit by the grace of God. The story of Jonah is in some ways a microcosm of how Jews viewed Gentiles.

Where the Jews failed, Jesus would triumph. Jesus would command His followers to "be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In Christ, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile would be broken, and the two would be made into one—the Church (Eph. 2:14-16). Thank God that the salvation message is for both Jew and Gentile.

With that in mind, let's look at our text. There are two recorded miracles in verses 24-37. The first is an encounter with a Gentile woman whose little daughter was demon possessed. The second is an encounter with a deaf man.

The Syrophoenician Woman

In verse 24, Jesus and His disciples² travel³ to the region of Tyre. Matthew 15:21 adds "the district Tyre and Sidon." These are coastal cities along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, about 35 miles northwest of Galilee. Today we know this area as southern Lebanon. The two cities were about 20 miles apart, and this is Gentile region. Jesus probably went there for some rest and seclusion, because verse 24 says "He wanted no one to know of it."

Rest and seclusion would not last very long, as verse 24 continues: "Yet He could not escape notice." He would very soon be found by a Syrophoenician woman. Mark describes her as a Gentile woman of the Syrophoenician race (25). Matthew adds that she was also a Canaanite (Mt. 15:22). This is already a bad start. First, she's a woman, whom the Jews considered as inferior to a man. Second, she's a Gentile, unclean and inferior to Jews.

² Matthew mentions His disciples in 15:23.

³ Matthew 15:21 speaks of them withdrawing into the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Third, she's a Canaanite, an enemy of the Jews. Fourth, she's from a pagan, idolatrous region. No rabbi would allow someone like this to be in their presence for any period of time, but Jesus allowed it.

Now, how did a Gentile woman from this region hear about Jesus? Well, back in Mark 3:8, we saw that a great multitude of people came from surrounding areas to see Jesus. One of the areas recorded in Mark 3:8 is Tyre and Sidon. Perhaps she was there that day, or that someone there had spread the news.

She went to see Jesus because she had a problem: Her little daughter had an unclean spirit, verse 25. In other words, her little daughter was demon possessed. Matthew adds, "cruelly" demon-possessed (15:22). The situation was urgent and desperate, and she came to Jesus with a very humble and reverent attitude. Verse 25 tells us that she fell at His feet, and Matthew says she bowed down before Him (15:25).

She asked Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter (Mk. 7:26) by crying out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed" (Mt. 15:22). At first, Jesus didn't respond (Mt. 15:23), so she "kept asking" (Mk. 7:26). This got to the point where the disciples probably became frustrated, annoyed, and impatient, so they asked Jesus to send the woman away (Mt. 15:23).

When Jesus does answer, He delays even more. He answered her in Matthew 15:24, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And in Mark 7:27 Jesus said, "Let the children be satisfied first for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." In other words, Jesus tells her that His primary focus is Israel. Like we said earlier, the salvation message is given to the Jews, and through them, the message will reach the world. However, the way Jesus answered her seems quite cold and rude, nothing like the compassionate Jesus we've seen so far.

I mean, in His illustration, He likened her to a dog. That's a common derogatory term people used for Gentiles. They called them "dogs." But if we look at the original language, we find a very important detail. In the Greek, it can be translated as "little dog," which is not like the repulsive mongrels. Little dogs are comparable to house pets cared for by the family.⁴

⁴ Cleon Rodgers Jr. and Cleon Rodgers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 83.

Here's the idea: The analogy serves to illustrate that Israel comes first. The woman got it, and she is persistent. She responds, "Yes Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs" (7:28). Just to have the crumbs is enough; this is not a person who has self-righteous pride. Then finally, Jesus answers her request. Matthew 15:28 says, "'O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed at once."

Now we understand why Jesus delayed in answering her. Now we understand why He answered her the way He did. He was teaching His disciples and showcasing her authentic faith. Think about all the people in Israel who had seen and heard Jesus and were only interested in Jesus superficially. They just wanted to be healed, see miracles, or get free food. In contrast, this woman's faith was genuine. She came humbly, reverently, and persistently. She recognized Him as Lord and Son of David. She knew that He was God. She knew that He was omnipresent, because she trusted Him when He cast out the demon from afar—He never physically contacted her daughter. She cried out for mercy. She understood the priority that Israel comes first, but Gentiles are benefited from the overflow of what is given to Israel.

No wonder Jesus said her faith is great. It is only recorded twice that Jesus called anyone's faith great and both times are Gentiles.⁵ Think about it: She's a Gentile from a pagan region. She grew up around idolatry, not having much exposure to the word of God. Against that backdrop, what great faith.

This story serves as a preview of the Gentile salvation to come. Shortly after this, Jesus would commission His disciples to be His witnesses to even the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The Deaf Man

Jesus leaves the region of Tyre, verse 31, and travels 20 miles north through Sidon, then He travels southeast until He reaches the region of Decapolis (7:31). This is a circuitous journey. Their destination, Decapolis, is also a Gentile region. Literally, it means a region of ten cities, and this is southeast of the Sea of Galilee.

Here, He encounters a deaf man who had a speech impediment (7:32). How did they know about Jesus? Again, this is a Gentile region. Well, Jesus visited nearby in Mark 5:1-20. You may remember this, but in Mark 5:1-20, we met a man who was possessed by a

⁵ Centurion, Matthew 8:5-13.

legion of demons. When Jesus cast the demons into the swine, the swine all drowned. Having the demons cast out by Jesus, the man wanted to accompany Jesus, but Jesus told him to stay behind, serving as a missionary to this region. Mark 5:20, “And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.” That man probably did an excellent job of telling people about Jesus, because now that Jesus is back, people came to see Him.

Now, this deaf man who had the speech impediment could’ve been deaf from birth or had it for a long time. People with that kind of disability were ostracized by society. Society back then is nothing like society today, which makes so many accommodations for all kinds of disabilities. While people might be cruel and cold toward this man, Jesus was compassionate toward him.

Jesus took him aside from the crowd and healed the man (7:33). Now, the method of healing at first seems odd. Verses 33-34 says, He “put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; [34] and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ that is, ‘Be opened!’”⁶

Here’s the best explanation I’ve read.⁷ Remember, the man can’t hear, so Jesus used some form of “sign language.” First, the fingers in the ears shows the man that Jesus understood his problem. It’s a physical illness. People in those days thought deaf people with speech impediments had a mental illness, but Jesus knew it was a physical condition. Second, spitting and touching the tongue identified his speech impediment. Saliva was thought to have healing properties, so it also signified healing. Third, looking to heaven would show that the power came from above, from God. Fourth, the deep sigh showed sympathy for his agonies.

Jesus’ healing was immediate, verse 35. Not only that, but the man began speaking plainly. He went from being deaf and having a speech impediment to being fully restored and able to speak plainly. He didn’t have to undergo speech therapy or learn to speak.

Jesus ordered them in verse 36, “Not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it.” This man who couldn’t speak can now speak and is ordered not to speak. Why did Jesus make such command? We’ve seen this before.

⁶ Ephphatha is Aramaic; “Be opened” is Greek.

⁷ John MacArthur, *Mark 1-6 The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, 377.

Well, there are many reasons, but one of which is that the gospel is not complete. Jesus' death and resurrection has not occurred yet.

People heard about it and responded in utter astonishment: verse 37, they said, "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." He heals perfectly. There were no partial healings, or disease too great for Him. No matter how Jesus heals someone—whatever the method—the result is the same: perfect healing.

Conclusion

Jew and Gentile both obtain salvation through the same gospel message, through the same Savior, and in the same way. Let us not neglect our duty to proclaim the gospel. Let us not be like the Jews who hated the thought of God being compassionate to the Gentiles. Let us not be the Christians who can't stand the thought of others benefiting from God's grace.