

40 Mark 7:31-37

The Gentile Mission

Text

Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Introduction

Before we begin, let us take a step back from the trees and have a look at the forest. You may remember in the opening chapters of Genesis the fall of man and the curses of God. When everyone finished the blame game God rendered his judgment in the form of curses. It was as God was cursing the serpent that He issued the *proto-evangelion* - the first gospel. There was the promise that the Seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. While certainly that curse had in view the destruction of Satan himself, I think more broadly it included the notion of destroying the works of Satan as well. Peter says, in 1 Pet 3:8, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." The foremost of the works of Satan was the temptation and deceit that brought about the fall of man. Jesus came to undo that which Satan had done.

The question then becomes, "Who is this promised Seed?" What line is he going to come from? As people began to multiply what line was the Seed going to spring from? The options narrowed at the flood, but then people began to multiply again. It narrowed again at Abraham. He was a pagan, called out of a pagan people. There was nothing to recommend himself to God. It would be several generations before there even was such a thing as a Jew. God's promise to Abraham was that he (God) was going to bless the nations (plural) through Abraham.

There was nothing in Abraham that made God choose him, and there was nothing in Israel as a people that made God choose them. It was simply God's good choice. He was pleased to bring the promised Seed into the world through that line. He was pleased to use that people as a picture of the work of His Son. Inherently there was nothing better about that people group over any other people group. Both Jew and Gentile are alike under sin. It is nothing that goes into a man that makes him unclean. There is nothing external to man that makes him unclean. No matter your DNA you are a sinner. Now the Seed has come. And we see that he is beginning to fulfill

the promise given to the head of humanity and the promise given to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed through him.

Bringing People to Christ

Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

Jesus continues his Gentile tour by going to the Decapolis by way of Sidon. This was not exactly on the way. Jesus has to go about 20 miles north of Tyre to Sidon, and then continues this long horseshoe shaped journey by traveling south west for many miles. It is difficult to tell exactly which route Jesus took, but he is clearly staying in Gentile territory for a period of time. This is not a day's trip. In fact the best guesses seem to be that he was there for about six months. This is a long time for him! Given that his ministry was only 3.5 yrs, Jesus spent close to 15% of his time in Gentile territory.

Mark is writing to Roman Christians who may be struggling with their place in this Jewish-birthed religion. What place do they have? By including this Gentile tour Mark assures his Gentile readers that Jesus had them in mind also. Were they not dogs? Were they not unclean? Yes, they were unclean, but their defilement came not from those external things, their defilement came from within. Their defilement was a product of their human condition, not their Gentile condition. Therefore both Jew and Greek are alike under sin. Jesus is not the Lord of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles too. The King has come, and he is making commands of allegiance, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

32 And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

As Jesus was traveling about, or perhaps as he entered into regions, the crowds would gather. We have no way of knowing how big this crowd was. We simply have an impersonal plural, "They." It is plural, but we don't know how many. It could have been just a few friends that brought this man. On the other hand, we see in chapter 8 a crowd of at least 4000 people so this plural could have been a pretty large number. We just don't know in this text and it makes no difference.

It says that these people begged Jesus to heal him. The original is *parakaleo*. It is a strong term. The ESV did a good job translating it as begged. They begged him, they pleaded, they called out to him to lay their hands on their friend. This is the same thing that we need to do. If you have children, you need to bring them to Christ and you need to plead with God to do his work. You can show Christ to them, but you cannot save them. You can bring them to Christ and lay them down at his feet, but you cannot save them. At that point you pray to God, plead with God, call out to God on behalf of your children.

If you have no children, there is no greater act of love you can do for another person than to show Christ to them. With friends or family or coworkers or fellow students or teammates there is no great love that to bring them to Christ, set them at his feet, and then plead with God on their behalf. Fervently, passionately, continually, pray for the soul of these people. Let us do the same thing! Oh, let us do the same thing. God forgive us!

They bring to Jesus a man who has a double illness. He is deaf and he has a speech impediment. These two are often related. If you cannot hear, it is difficult to speak correctly. Most likely this man was not born deaf. This is probably something that afflicted him later in life. If he was born

deaf he would never have learned how to speak in the first place. Written language, while it obviously existed, was fairly scarce. Few were the people who had books. Still, even if he had parchments and could read quite well, he would have no way of knowing how the words were spoken. They did not have the kind of teaching techniques for the deaf as we have today. If a person was born deaf, they would never speak.

So most likely this man was able to hear earlier in life. He learned the spoken language but then became deaf and was not able to hear himself and his speaking suffered as a result. We can appreciate this fact whenever we listen to someone sing who has on a headset. They are singing along, but they cannot hear themselves very well while unfortunately everyone else can. This is why singers have monitors. Being able to hear yourself is important to being able to sing or speak well. We can correct what we can hear. Most likely this is what this man is suffering with, although it is possible that these are independent problems.

The term that Mark uses here for speech impediment is *mogilalon*. This is the only place it occurs in the NT. The only other place this occurs in all of scripture is in the LXX of Isaiah 35:5-6:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;
2 it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God....
5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.
For waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

We see again that waters are breaking forth into the wilderness. In a place where there has been no water, no life, no springs of living water are beginning to flow. Some people read passages like this and are actually expecting that geographic regions of arid climates will actually become temperate or tropical in nature. They are therefore looking to a time of environmental transformation. But this misses the entire point of this passage. It is not about sand and cactuses and ecological makeovers, this is about the gospel of the kingdom finding its way into the scriptureless, Godless land of the Gentiles.

Signs Before the Signs

33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

The size of the crowd doesn't matter, I say, because Jesus pulls this man aside. He is not

interested in a show. He cares more about the individual. Jesus would certainly heal publicly especially if the masses can be taught something like how it is right to do good on the Sabbath. He would also act publicly so that everything would be out in the open with very little room for accusations from the Pharisees. What could they say against him, they people saw his deeds with their own eyes. So while Jesus often did things publicly, he is clearly not interested in making a show of things. He is no entertainer. He is not there to amuse people or be some traveling circus. He is there for real ministry. And when it is appropriate he will dismiss the people like when he raised Jairus' daughter. Without Scribes or Pharisees here to worry about, Jesus takes this man aside to minister to him personally.

The way in which Jesus ministers to this man is very strange to our Western thinking. Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then his spit and touched the man's tongue! What in the world is he doing?! First, let's consider the whole spit thing. R.T. France notes that, "This would not have been as surprising in the ancient Mediterranean world as it is to us; there are several ancient accounts of the use of saliva especially in curing blindness."¹ Strange as it may be to us, it was a bit more common back then.

Ok, so what's this mean? Jesus is using some bunk snake-oil salesman method to cure a man? Not at all. The man cannot hear and may not know exactly what is going on here. When Jesus pulls him aside and does these two things I believe that he is communicating with the man; it was a kind of sign language. He utilizes the saliva probably because it was viewed as a curing agent of sorts. He did it not to give credence to it so much as to communicate to the man that he intended to heal him. Jesus touched his ears and tongue to communicate exactly where the healing would take place. In doing this, as Lane notes, "Jesus entered into the mental world of the man and gained his confidence."²

At this point was the man healed? No. Did this touch actually heal him? No. But now in verse 34 Jesus looks up to heaven. Having communicated to the man that he intends to heal him, Jesus now looks to heaven as the source of his healing power. There is nothing magical about saliva. Christ's power was from God. It is God who provides the healing.

Jesus sighs and says, "*Ephphatha*" which means "be opened." Upon the speaking of the word the man's ears are opened and his tongue is loosed. Literally it means his tongue was unchained. He spoke clearly. There was no adjustment period of hearing himself again and having to re-teach his vocal chords. When he spoke he spoke clearly.

36 And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Although he took the man aside to minister to him privately, there was no way the waiting crowd would not see the result. When they did, our text says "they were astonished beyond measure." The ears of this man had been unstopped and his tongue loosed, and now the crowd cannot believe their ears!

Jesus commanded them to silence but having seen what they have there is no way they can keep this to themselves. Most likely this is the same problem that he had back in chapter one when he cleansed the leper. At that time he also commanded the leper to keep silent but he did not. He went around telling everyone about Jesus. It got to the point in chapter one that Jesus could no longer enter a town openly. In the passage prior to that one Jesus said, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." All this fervor prohibited him

from entering the towns to continue teaching. It is likely that the same sort of thing is happening here. Jesus commands them to silence but they do not obey.

Application

Steve Lawson notes how opposite this is with us. He commanded them to keep silent and they didn't, and he commanded us to go and proclaim and we don't. Full permission has been granted to us to proclaim the gospel and here we sit. More than that, a decree from our Creator has gone forth that we shall make his name known, and here we sit. What wicked servants we are! Let us consider one more time the significance of this event. Miracles are wondrous things, quite literally.

They serve as badges of authentication. No one can perform a miracle in their own power. Only God can perform miracles. Thus the miracle worker has Divine confirmation of his role. Second, we need to realize that there are an infinite number of things that could be done which are beyond human power, so why did Jesus do the specific acts he did? He could have arranged the stars in heaven to spell out a message. He could have turned everything in the world a translucent blue. He could have turned all the horses into manatees. Why did he do the specific acts of wonder that he did? I believe that these are pictures of what ailments we all suffer from spiritually. How many times does scripture talk about the uncleanness of our sins? The one who can cleanse a leper can cleanse you. How often does scripture talk about how we are spiritually blind? The one who can open the eyes of the blind can cause us to see the kingdom of God. How often is our spiritual state described as dead? But the same one who raised Jairus' daughter can give you new life. How often does scripture speak of our inability to hear?

Joh 8:47 Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

Joh 10:3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

Joh 10:27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

Mat 13:14 Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.

Many other times Jesus said, "To those who have ears let them hear."

The same one who can open the ears of the deaf can open our ears to the voice of our Shepherd. Notice also his sovereign call. When we speak of the total depravity of man and monergistic regeneration many people will mockingly say that if we believe that man is really dead in his sins then it makes no sense to give him the gospel because dead people don't hear. They think that that is a solid argument against our theology because it seemingly reduces it to the absurd. If so then we will gladly take our position among those that the world calls foolish because we can only follow our Lord. When he commanded Lazerus to come forth, didn't Jesus know that Lazerus was dead and dead people can't hear? When he told Jairus daughter to arise, was that a silly for him to do because dead people can't hear. When he commands in this text, "be opened" did he not know that the man was deaf and could not hear him? In all of these examples, not only were the people unable to hear Jesus in their natural state, but even if they could they had no power to do what Jesus was asking of them. He gives the command, and he gives the grace for us

to hear and obey the command which we would otherwise have no power to do. It is his call in the gospel that quickens us. And it is his grace that enables us to obey.

In light of all that Christ has done to cleanse us, open our eyes and ears, and give us new life, let us, as representatives of people from every tribe nation and tongue, glorify the God of Israel!

1 France, 303

2 Lane, 266-267.