

## Mark 7:24-37 (NLT)

### The Gospel of Mark Jesus the One who Opens

**Introduction:** Mark is written for disciples. It's a road map for discipleship to Jesus. So in a time where there is a lot of confusion about what's going on, who we are and what we are to be doing - Mark's gospel is a road map for the people of God in how to follow the way of Jesus.

Mark is also a book of mystery - Mark's Gospel is so filled with mysterious references to Jesus and his identity. Mark, though rarely quoting the OT, is a master of the Biblical text and has told the story of How God is cryptically and mysteriously present and bringing his kingdom on earth through the suffering, crucified and resurrected messiah, Jesus.

*"For Mark, the character of God's presence in Jesus is a mystery that can be approached only by indirection, through riddle like allusions to the Old Testament." - Richard Hays*

Mark through his portrayal of Jesus is provoking the most important question that has ever been put to humanity, who is Jesus?

As we've noted Mark's Jesus speaks cryptically and mysteriously on purpose because he wants us to press into his story of Jesus so we don't miss what God is doing, so we don't miss how God is bringing his kingdom into this world and how we get to be a part of that kingdom.

#### 1. Jesus and the Gentile Woman and a gentile Church

- a. Long ago when we started teaching through this book I mentioned how Mark was written for the early church, not only

to know the story of Jesus, but in order to form the early church in the way of Jesus. We know that the church at that time had a very large Gentile population. Therefore the stories about clean and unclean, about outsiders, gentile territories, gentiles, women, etc, would have been hugely important and validating for this community - Mark shows how Jesus was already sowing the seeds for the Gospel to go to the Gentiles and that they were not unclean second class members in the church...But joint heirs of the grace and salvation.

- b. As we move into this next section It's good to note that Mark intends these next two stories to be the physical outworking of what Jesus has just taught to the religious leaders, the crowds and the disciples.
- c. Though the topic and following discussions of the last section centered around eating with unwashed hands and misconceptions about defilement and uncleanness this would have had real life practical ramifications for the Jewish community - not just about what they ate, but more specifically about who they ate and socialized with.
- d. The Kosher Laws along with the tradition of the Elders made it so that Jews did not eat or fraternize with Gentiles. Of course through the Mosaic law we hear God's intention for Israel it is that they would not be influenced by the nations around them, but not that they would be completely exclusive! The Jewish people were to be a light to the nations - their laws and lifestyle were to be a shining light in the midst of the other nations and their idols - God's Justice in contrast to their injustice, God's mercy in contrast to their cruelty, God's righteousness in contrast to their unrighteousness..etc All of this was meant to draw the nations around them to the one true God.
- e. But by the time of the first century this separation from Gentiles reached its pinnacle. It had gone from separation to

extreme prejudice and xenophobia. Listen to the teaching from the pseudepigraphal book Jubilees - "Separate from the Gentiles, and do not eat with them, and do not according to their works, and do not become their associate, for their works are unclean."

2. Taken as a whole, Jubilees casts a decidedly negative shadow over Gentiles

a. Jubilees retells the story of Dinah, Jacob's daughter, recorded in Genesis 34 and then adds its own commentary - "The children of Israel are to forbid, without exception, any and all intermarriage with gentiles, including converted gentiles - any man who violates this statute..shall be stoned to death, and any daughter or sister given to the gentiles shall be burned with fire. Such violations result in the defilement of a household, and contaminate the nation...."

b. With this underlying view of the religious leaders of Jesus day, Mark portrays Jesus as intentionally crossing ethnic, religious, and social barriers for the sake of extending the blessing of God to the Gentiles.

3. In these two stories Mark shows that Gentiles are to share the bread of fellowship in God's kingdom and that Jesus has come to open up the Way, especially for the Gentiles.

a. First notice how Mark highlights Jesus' geographical move directly following his confrontation with the religious leaders - "Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. (This is outside of the land of Israel and thoroughly gentile territory.

b. Now watch what happens in this story it's fascinating - **"He didn't want anyone to know which house he was staying in, but he couldn't keep it a secret. Right away a woman who had heard about him came and fell at his feet. Her little girl was possessed by an evil spirit, and she begged him to**

**cast out the demon from her daughter. Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia, Jesus told her, “First I should feed the children—my own family, the Jews. It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.” She replied, “That’s true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children’s plates.” “Good answer!” he said. “Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter.” And when she arrived home, she found her little girl lying quietly in bed, and the demon was gone.”**

- i. Jesus is trying to hide out with his disciples BUT he cannot be hidden ! A woman who is a Gentile, a Syrophenician in particular, seeks Jesus out and asks that he will heal her demon oppressed daughter. Jesus in typical fashion answers her with a Parabolic statement - We’ve noted in the past teachings that whenever Jesus teaches in parables - people don’t get it, not the religious leaders, not the biblical scholars, not the crowd, not even the disciples. They have to follow up Jesus’ teaching with a private lesson. BUT this gentile Woman immediately get’s what Jesus is saying and actually answers him back with her own parable. Amazing! What is Mark getting at here??
- c. Now, many have been taken aback by Jesus' response to this helpless woman and her child - He pushes her off, refuses to help and calls her daughter a little dog (Jesus is most likely using this phrase on purpose since the Jews considered the Gentiles dogs - unfit and unclean. Jesus uses the less offensive term for a pet or puppy, but he obviously does it on purpose)... What is the deal? As we’ve noted in the past - Jesus is looking for faith - and parables are a test to all who hear them -will they respond in faith, or dismiss them, and

write them off. The woman displays incredible faith and insight -which is unparalleled in Mark's Gospel - not only does she understand the parable - something even disciples are unable to do, but she extends the parable to include the gentiles in the blessings of God at present.

- d. In Jesus' response he doesn't say he won't help her, but that he is here for the children first. It's not right to take the children bread and throw it to the little dogs.. Jesus seems to be saying, I am here for Israel first, the children and heirs of Abraham, but there will be a time for another feeding. BUT the woman responds, (And I'm paraphrasing) I'm not asking for an exclusive meal, But if the dogs eat the crumbs under the table, they are fed at the same time as the children. Let the children be fed, but don't keep us from the crumbs....
- e. Jesus, responds - for this statement, go your way the demon has left your daughter!
  - i. *"While Jubilees exemplifies a proverbial fear of the outsider - a common refrain in both ancient and contemporary rhetoric - Mark plays off this perspective and points the audience (Disciples of Jesus) to a new way of thinking. Instead of promoting stereotypes, Mark's Jesus subverts expectations by repeatedly crossing religious and cultural boundaries, demonstrating that purity is a matter of the heart, not ethnicity, food, or unwashed hands. Although Israel does hold a special place in salvation history, the kingdom of God is not identified with a particular people, ethnicity, tribe, or language. Mark's Jesus extends blessings of the kingdom to those outside the Jewish community and simultaneously paves the way for the expansion of the church to gentile "dogs." - Kelly Iverson, Reading Mark in Context*

#### 4. Jesus and the Gentile man

a. But look what comes next - Mark presents us with a man, who the crowds from the Decapolis, (Ten Gentile cities) have brought to Jesus to be healed. We're told that he is deaf and that he has a speech impediment. Jesus takes the man aside privately, puts his fingers in his ears, spits and touches the man's tongue.. and then looking up to heaven he groaned, and said to him EPHPHATHA - Be Opened! and his ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly...

#### b. What in the world is going on here??

c. Mark uses an extremely rare word to describe this man's speech defect. It is the greek word "Mogilalos" and can only be found in the Septuagint in Isaiah 35:6. It's what we've been referring to as an OT hyperlink.

d. This passage in Isaiah is about God's promise to deliver and restore his people from the Exile. It pictures THE LORD, YHWH, Leading his people out of exile and through the wilderness.. Listen to it!

i. "Say to those who have an anxious heart, **"Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."** Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 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; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall

**not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” - Isaiah 35**

- e. I want you to consider for a moment what Mark is hinting at here, what proverbial shoe he is dropping!
- f. We already saw how the passage about the feeding of the five thousand was Mark’s hyper link to the prophetic passages about God making the wilderness a garden like place, but notice here in that same section from Isaiah the blind, the lame, and the stammering tongue - all these are made whole and brought into God’s redemption and set on the way of the Lord - the highway of holiness.
- g. It cannot be missed that what Mark is doing here is showing how Isaiah 35’s vision of YHWH’s rescue of his people is being fulfilled by Jesus but in a way that no one expected - This isn’t just about the Jews being redeemed, and rescued it’s about “unclean” Gentiles as well, it’s about them being made holy, it’s about the whole of humanity, regardless of ethnicity, being included in God’s redemption and being given an identity with the people of God..
  - i. It’s beautiful how in this passage mark shows Jesus looking up to heaven and then saying be opened. It makes you wonder what is being opened?
  - ii. Mark has already shown us in Chapter one that in Jesus God has torn open the heavens and come down (Mark 1:10) that in Jesus he has removed the veil that separates heaven and earth, and this is exactly what Jesus is here to do - To open up the Kingdom of heaven and to open

up the way, the path back to God, through redemption in Jesus. Jesus is here To open eyes, to open ears, to open hearts

- h. Pope Benedict XVI commented this on these verses..
- i. *"There is an inner closing, which covers the deepest core of the person, what the Bible calls the 'heart.' That is what Jesus came to 'open,' to liberate, to enable us to fully live our relationship with God and with others. "...This little word, 'Ephphatha—Be opened,' sums up Christ's entire mission. He became man so that man, made inwardly deaf and dumb by sin, would become able to hear the voice of God, the voice of love speaking to his heart, and learn to speak in the language of love, to communicate with God and with others."*
  - ii. *Reflecting on this story today, we are compelled to ask ourselves, what is blocking our spiritual ears to hearing the word of God?*
  - iii. *What has stiffened our tongues so that we hesitate to respond fully in faith and love? Let us pray that Jesus opens our ears and mouths to the message of the gospel. Let us pray that Jesus opens heaven anew to us. Let us pray for all this knowing that Jesus has already opened up the heavens for us and even now is interceding for us in heaven."*
5. **In closing:** I wonder in what ways do I need to be opened, and in you need to be opened? Reopened to the hope that is found only in Jesus? Reopened to forgiveness because bitterness has grown in our hearts; Reopened to faith because we have become paralyzed by fear? Jesus, says to us - Be opened! May the Holy spirit renew our hearts through the love, the hope and grace that are to be found in Christ alone.



6. I want to reiterate some of what I said last week. If Jesus has come to open up the way of salvation, to open up the Kingdom of God; are Jesus' disciples helping or hindering that work? Are we like the religious leaders clogging up the way, keeping people from seeing Jesus, through our own political affiliations that we have attached to our faith? And finally will we allow Jesus to open our hearts and eyes and ears, to be healed from this, and then to be channels of His grace, those who would bring people into the way of the Lord, the way of salvation...