

Opening Gentile Ears and Releasing their Tongues

Mark 7:31-37

Halifax: 24 November 2019

Introduction

This morning we will continue our sermon series from Mark.

- Today, we will be looking at Mark 7:31-37 where our Lord heals a deaf man with a dysfunctional tongue in the Gentile territory of the Decapolis.

In the previous passage, we saw Jesus enter Gentile territory with His disciples, journeying up to the region of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia.

- Perhaps His goal was to get away with His disciples...
 - for since they returned from their mission they had attempted to get away once only to be pursued by zealots who wanted to make him king...
 - and after this, they had been overwhelmed with a constant flow of people seeking Jesus out for healing... you will remember, perhaps, how He would have people waiting for Him when He entered a village.
 - And besides all of this, the leaders among the Jews had recently concluded that He and His disciples were not properly purified because they did not follow the traditions of the elders in washing themselves...
 - traditions that Jesus exposed as actually destroying the purity that they sought to enhance—as is always the case with man’s efforts to enhance God’s worship—they always turn the focus away from the heart to the externals.
 - And besides all of this, Herod Antipas had recently executed John the Baptist and perhaps would be pursuing Jesus and the twelve next.
- Whether it was any or all of these reasons, in God’s providence it became an occasion in which the mercy of Christ began to spill over to the Gentiles.
 - Last time, in Mark 7:24-30, we saw how a Syro-Phoenician woman sought out Jesus and pled with Him to cast a demon out of her daughter...
 - And how she refused to take “no” for an answer when Jesus put her off and explained that it was not appropriate to take the children’s bread (Israel’s provision) and cast it to the little dogs and she replied that even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table...
 - She saw the mercy of God in Israel more clearly than the Israelites did!
 - She claimed no right to a place at the table, but saw so much mercy in Christ to them that she was sure there would be plenty of crumbs to take care of her!
 - Jesus was pleased and said (v. 29), “**For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter,**” and so it was.

And in today’s passage, Mark 7:31-37, we find Jesus keeping to the Gentile regions,

- from the best we can tell from the description given, making a circuit in the north to the east and then journeying down on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee to the Decapolis—in the general vicinity of the place where He had cast out the legion of demons from the man that He had left with the call to tell all in the area the great things that the Lord had done for him.

- Perhaps it was those had who heard about Him, or who even those who had seen Him themselves in that former visit who now bring this deaf-mute man to Him in today's reading...
- Let's take a look.

Give attention as I read to you beginning at Mark 7:31.

- This is the Word of God. Please listen now as I read it to you.

Mark 7:31-37: Again, departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, He came through the midst of the region of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. ³² Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him. ³³ And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵ Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy word.

Mark is the only gospel that records this specific miracle; however, Matthew speaks of this visit to the Decapolis and of many miracles that Jesus did in this place.

- It would appear that what Mark records is the first miracle Jesus did that led to many others coming to Him as suggested by Mark and described by Matthew.
 - Here is Matthew's account from Matthew 15:29-31: **Jesus departed from there [from Tyre and Sidon], skirted the Sea of Galilee, and went up on the mountain and sat down there. ³⁰ Then great multitudes came to Him, having with them *the* lame, blind, mute, maimed, and many others; and they laid them down at Jesus' feet, and He healed them. ³¹ So the multitude marveled when they saw *the* mute speaking, *the* maimed made whole, *the* lame walking, and *the* blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.**
 - You can see that the people involved are mostly Gentiles because Matthew describes their reaction of glorifying “the God of Israel.”

There is much for us to consider from what Mark has given us in this passage.

I. First, see here how Jesus opens ears and releases tongues.

A. Look at what He does for this man in our text.

1. What an unhappy condition.
 - a. He was a deaf man whose tongue was chained—
 - The word *mog-il-al'-os* that is used to describe his speech impediment in verse 32 has a lot of latitude ranging from a serious speech impediment to complete inability to speak...
 - but when his healing is described in verse 35, it literally reads that “the chain (used of chains that hold prisoners) of his tongue was broken,”
 - so the impression is that though he made some efforts at speaking, he encountered difficulty—he was tongue-tied.

- b. Deafness and inability to speak is one of the worst maladies.
 - Many who suffer from it testify that they would rather be blind than deaf because deafness isolates them from discourse with others.
 - This was especially the case when paper was too expensive for regular use and there were so few other options for communication.
 - A person like this man suffered estrangement from other people and was often left without knowing what was going on...
 - For example, did he even know where his friends were taking him when they brought him to Jesus on this occasion?
 - Who was this One? And why did they bring him to Him?
 - 2. But marvellously, Jesus does indeed open his ears and release his tongue.
 - We will consider the method in a moment, but for now, just think of how wonderful this must have been for this man.
 - He had both the faculty of hearing and the faculty of speech restored in a single encounter with Jesus.
 - Now he could talk with his friends, he could share his thoughts with them, he could listen to music and to a story, he could hear the news of the day and share it himself, he could hear public speakers.
 - He could fully experience people again in the way that we are designed to experience them—personal conversation.
- B. This restoration of hearing and speech represents Jesus’ ministry to all the Gentiles.
1. Mark uses the language of Isaiah 35 to describe this man’s malady.
 - Most commentators believe he is making a deliberate reference to it.
 - The word *mog-il-al’-os* that Mark uses in verse 32 that is translated “an impediment in his speech” is not used anywhere else in the New Testament.
 - And it is only used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) **once**—in Isaiah 35:6 where Isaiah says that **“the tongue of the dumb shall sing.”**
 - It is very striking that Mark should connect the healing of this man in Gentile regions with Isaiah 35 because Isaiah 35 is the chapter that follows chapters that pronounce judgment on many of Israel’s neighbours...
 - And it does so by proclaiming that the once desolate places including the Gentile regions will “blossom abundantly and rejoice, even with the joy of singing,” when God visits His people.
 - Isaiah 35:5-6 says: **Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. ¶ Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.**
 - The blessing of Jesus, with the healing of this man (and of the Syro-Phoenician woman), is beginning to spill over into the spiritual wastelands surrounding Israel.
 - Whether this man was a Jew is not the issue (we don’t know)—the issue is that Jesus is doing miracles now in this Gentile region.

2. And surely the opening of this man's ears and the releasing of his tongue is meant to testify of Jesus' entire ministry to the Gentiles—it is symbolic of His mercy to the world...
 - That He has come to restore communication between God and man—to open deaf ears and to loosen bound tongues.
 - Jesus gives those who are deaf to God, even those lost in sin, ears to hear the voice of God again!
 - He loosens the tongue of the most hardened sinner to call upon the name of the LORD and to lift up his voice in praise to God with those who love Him.
 - As those who were once isolated from God and unable to communicate with Him, we are marvellously restored.
 - Now we can hear His gracious promises of forgiveness of sin, we can learn of His holiness and goodness, and we can respond in prayer and praise.
 - Isolation from our Creator is ended!

TRANS> What a glorious thing.

- Now I want you to look with me at the method Jesus uses to restore this man's hearing and speaking.

II. Jesus' method for restoring this man is very instructive.

- It grabs our attention because it is unusual
- A. There are several features that make it stand out from other miracles.
 1. First, that He calls the man to come apart from the crowd.
 2. Then, that He puts His fingers in the man's ears.
 3. And then, that He spits, presumably on His fingers, and then touches the man's tongue with His spittle.
 4. Next, that He looks up to heaven (not something He usually does).
 5. And then, that He sighs.
 6. And finally, that He speaks a word of command in Aramaic (ephphatha which means "be opened").
 - B. We cannot speculate or allegorise here (some have gone to absurd lengths), but what is on the face of these actions?
 1. They are considerate of the man's condition.
 - Remember, he was deaf and could not speak.
 - We don't even know if he knew why his friends brought him to Jesus or if he even knew who Jesus was.
 - Taking him aside may have been to avoid publicity,
 - but it also may have been to make it easier for the man who may have been overwhelmed by all that was going on to step away from the crowd so he could focus.
 - In any case, what Jesus does here is a kind of mime.
 - In other words, He shows this man what He is doing without words...
 - The man knew, of course, that he was deaf, so Jesus puts His fingers in the man's ears.
 - The man knew that he could not speak, so Jesus puts His own spittle on the man's tongue to show him that He is going to loosen his tongue.

- By looking up to heaven, Jesus shows that He is connected to God the Father.
 - He does not typically heal by prayer because He has the authority in His own person as the Son of God, but by looking up here, He shows that He was sent from God in heaven.
 - By sighing, something that the man would be able to see, the man is, perhaps, able to see the compassion of Jesus for him...
 - Jesus often speaks compassionately when He heals—so here He shows His compassion by sighing.
 - All of this reminds us that Jesus tailors His healing to each one's condition.
 - He can save through ordinary means (hearing by faith)...
 - Or He can by other means for those who are not able to hear—such as infants who have ears, but cannot understand.
 - We are only tied to the means when we are capable of using them.
 - If you are in prison and cannot hear the word or come to the Lord's Supper, God can still work in you.
 - When Daniel was in Babylon and the temple was in ruins, he could still pray even though there was no sacrifice offered.
2. Secondly, this method focuses on Jesus as the agent of salvation.
- He, as it were, invades this man with His own life-giving virtue.
 - His fingers penetrating into the man's closed ears to open them.
 - His spittle, lubricating (not mechanically of course) the man's seized tongue to loosen it.
 - There is a sense in which Jesus shows us what He does for all sinners when He saves them.
 - Though He looks up to heaven to show that He is associated with the Father in glory,
 - it is Jesus' own fingers that introduce life to those dead ears so that they can hear...
 - And it is Jesus' own spittle that infuses the man with speech.
 - It is His own body and blood crucified and raised that gives us life.
 - By speaking the word, *ephphatha*, Jesus further shows that He is the one who has authority to command what this man needs by His own powerful call.
 - Perhaps this was the first word this man heard.
 - Regardless, it let the people of this Gentile region know that He had such authority and virtue in Himself as the Son of God, appointed to save.

TRANS> In short, we may say that Jesus Himself personally invades this infirm man with His own life to make the man whole.

C. We learn here that Jesus restores us by personally invading us with Himself.

1. He invades our ears so that they are able to hear His call and He invades our tongues so that they are freed to speak for the glory of God.
 - It is a very radical and personal infusion of His life into ours.
 - We abide in Him as a branch abides in a vine, receiving life from Him.

2. Only Jesus can do this.
 - We preachers can issue a general call.
 - We can plead with sinners to be reconciled to God.
 - We can warn of the dangers of ignoring the call and of the importance of receiving it.
 - We can tailor the message to individuals and we can refute specific objections with they may have with varying levels of skill...
 - But no matter how personally relevant our message may be and how accurately and passionately our message may be spoken,
 - we cannot invade anyone with life from the dead.
 - We cannot open the ears of their heart to truly receive the message; nor can we loosen their tongues so that they truly communicate with God.
 - Only Jesus can make dead ears hear and dead tongues sing.
 - Only He can open hearts to believe by the effectual working of His Spirit.
3. The great question for you is this: *Has Jesus Christ invaded your ears and your tongue?*
 - It may be that you have gone through the steps of baptism and professing your faith... I am not asking about that... Judas did those things and so have many others who were not brought to God.
 - My question is, has Jesus made you alive from the dead?
 - The greatest evidence that He has, which is spoken of from Genesis to Revelation, is faith.
 - It is faith that opens up communication between you and God.
 - So that you believe what He has spoken in His word.
 - You believe His promise to save all who call upon Him and so you call upon Him, you rest upon Him alone for salvation.
 - You hear His promise to give you new life by His Spirit, and so you look to Him for that life and actually experience it, dying to self and living to God.
 - You hear His warnings and you take them to heart—as spoken by the One who has all authority in heaven and earth.
 - And His commandments—they are not just rules, but personal commandments from the living God so that you cannot go on living as you used to live.
 - The evidence of the truth of your faith is your obedience—obedience personally directed to God—communication has been opened between you and God.
 - And in connection with that, you talk to Him in prayer, knowing that He is your Father who hears you...
 - You plead with Him, you speak to Him, not merely as a formalist, but as one who has the privilege of coming to the One who rules over all things and forgives your sins.

TRANS> Until Christ invades you to open your ears and loosen your tongue, your relationship to God is merely formal.

- And this brings us to our final consideration from this text... that...

III. The opening of ears and loosing of tongues brings forth a marvellous response.

A. The people who saw what Jesus did for this man were greatly impressed.

1. The language used to describe how impressed they were is extreme!
 - Verse 37 says that they were **astonished beyond measure**.
 - This is what many have called a superlative superlative.
 - J.A Alexander says: The effect of this great miracle on those who witnessed it was so extraordinary that the writer has to coin a Greek word to express the boundlessness of their amazement. This is a superlative superlative, formed by prefixing a particle expressive of excess both in Greek and English (*hyper*) to an adverb expressive of the same idea, so as to mean not merely *more than abundantly*, but *more than superabundantly*, or super-excessively.
 - The word carries the idea of our expression of being beside yourself, and adds that they were extremely beside themselves.
2. These were Gentiles (non-Jews), and while many of them may have heard about Jesus, it was quite another thing to see Him in action with their own eyes.
 - How could He possibly open ears and give speech to a man who was without both? They had never seen anything like this before.
 - They may well have heard of the casting out the demons from the demoniac of Gadara, but the casting out of demons was something they were somewhat familiar with...
 - Here was one who caused the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak!
3. Although Jesus commanded them to tell no one (verse 36), the word got out and soon, even in this Gentile region, He had a whole horde of people coming to be healed.
 - As we saw in Matthew's account **Then great multitudes came to Him, having with them *the* lame, blind, mute, maimed, and many others; and they laid them down at Jesus' feet, and He healed them.**
 - The episode to follow in both Matthew and Mark will be the feeding of the four thousand.
 - Such was the response to Jesus, even in this Gentile territory.
 - Yes, there were Jews in this place, but as noted before, it says that they glorified the "God of Israel" indicating that they were predominately Gentiles.

TRANS> So they were greatly impressed and rightly so, and they clamoured to Jesus for healing, just like the Jews had done in Galilee.

- But now we see something else about their response that makes them stand out from the Jews.

B. They declared that He had done all things well.

- Look at the whole of verse 37: **And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”**
1. Contrast this with what the Jewish leaders had said about Him.
 - On one occasion, we are told, **Mr 3:22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebub,” and, “By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons.”**
 - And more recently they had said, Mark 7:5: **“Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?”**
 - What a contrast!
 - The Jews: “He has an unclean spirit” and “He eats with unwashed hands.”
 - The Gentiles: “He does all things well...”
 2. It seems that what Jesus did for the deaf man with the chained tongue was indeed a harbinger of what He was to do for these Gentiles!
 - They had heard His word and now their tongues were speaking His praises.
 - Indeed, they spoke even better than they knew when they said “He has done all things well.”
 - As the Creator of the world, He did all things well.
 - As the One who sentenced us with death and sent the curse upon the creation, He did all things well.
 - As the One who sent the great flood of Noah’s day, He did all things well.
 - As the One who called Abraham, preserved him, and made him a great nation from which He, Christ, was to be born, He had done all things well.
 - And soon, they would learn of the cross and understand that He had done all things well in doing this to secure redemption for the world.
 - And in their personal lives, they would also come to see that by His sovereign hand, He had done all things well...
 - Had He given them hardships? It was all in justice for His glory and rightful honour.
 - Had He called them to salvation? How beautiful was His work of mercy, grace, and forgiveness.
 - Did they have blessings in this life mingled with persecutions and various trials and afflictions to help them grow and honour Him? He had done these well also.
- C. Is this your testimony? Can you say that He has done all things well?
1. If you cannot say that, you need to have your ears opened and your tongue loosened, for you do not yet know Him.
 - I fear for some of you in this congregation...
 - That you are like the Jews who are bitter because Christ has not fulfilled your expectations—
 - You cannot rest in Him because He has not given you all that you want and that He has given you many things that you do not want.

- That mere fact that He has given you things you do not want is not the problem—the problem is the you reject Him because of that.
 - The cross was something that Jesus did not want... but He said, “Not My will, but Yours be done.”
 - He wanted it if it was God’s will, but He did not want it for itself and said, “Not My will, but Yours be done.”
 - He was certainly able to say that the LORD had done all things well even though He did have to go the cross.
- And you if your ears are unstopped and your tongue is loosened, you will be able to say that He has done all things well too.
 - You will be like the Syro-Phoenician woman we looked at a couple of weeks ago who, like these people of the Decapolis, was stunned by His mercy to His people.
 - Others looked at Him and were disappointed, but she looked at Him with gospel eyes and saw unfathomable mercy.
 - Of course there are times we may deeply struggle as believers with what God is doing—the way Job did,
 - but at the foundation of it all, we know that our Redeemer lives and that He is gracious and we trust Him...
 - And when God humbles us, we repent as Job did for our folly in questioning whether He does all things well.

2. Saving faith is what makes the difference.

- What a contrast between those who have it and those who don’t!
 - You have the Jews who were the special recipients of Christ’s mercy and yet were disappointed with Him...
 - And you have the Gentiles who saw this mercy to Israel and were delighted with Him.
- It all comes down to how you meet Jesus.
 - Meet Jesus in your self-righteousness with your entitlement mentality that God owes you something and you will be disappointed with Him.
 - Meet Him at the cross with saving faith as those who only deserve His wrath and curse, and you will be among those who are delighted with Him.
- Perhaps you need ears to hear and a tongue to confess from the heart that He has done all things well!