

Jason Upchurch - Mark 7:24-37 - The Good News is for Dogs

I recently heard someone say that if they didn't know any better, waterboarding at Guantanamo Bay actually sounds like a really cool vacation. I mean, who wouldn't want to go waterboarding?

But most of us know that that's not the case. Waterboarding is a form of torture and Guantanamo Bay is a military compound in communist Cuba. Context matters. Location matters. Understanding history matters.

That's really how it is when we get to our passage here in Mark's gospel. If we didn't know any better, this section just seems like it's not all that significant. Jesus casts out a demon for a woman's daughter after seemingly insulting her. And then he does one of the most bizarre healings ever, spitting in order to heal a man who is deaf and mute.

He'll go on to feed 4,000 people plus women and children. And while all those things are significant and good, we might think maybe Mark is just slow playing the story line here a bit. Jesus has healed thousands of people and cast out many demons. He already fed 5,000 people plus women and children; 4,000 is impressive but do we really need this?

And the answer of course is yes because what Jesus is doing is replicating his amazing ministry to the Jews but now he's doing it in solidly Gentile territory. **Map**

This map is from the ESV Study Bible and what it shows us is that Jesus has now moved out of Jewish Galilee and is now working in solidly Gentile territory.

The healing of the Syrochenean woman's child is along the northern coastline in Tyre. The deaf man is in the lower left area in the Decapolis - a very Roman area surrounded by Jewish Israel. And the feeding of the 4,000 is likely in the southwest area - 5 o'clock - on the Lake of Galilee still in the Gentile region.

What we're seeing are Messiah's blessings coming to the Gentiles. And they are not second rate blessings. They are just as amazing and just as astonishing as the blessings he's giving to the Jews. Mark is painting the picture for us that Jesus is just as much about to bless the Gentiles - non-Jews - as he is the Jews.

We've talked in weeks past about why this matters. We've seen how Jesus declaring all foods clean was really a way to include the Gentiles in his redemptive work. Historically, God had mostly poured out his grace and mercy on the Jews but now through Jesus he is unleashing his grace and blessing on all nations just like he promised to Abraham. You and I - Gentiles - are recipients of the grace of God because of Jesus's work on the cross. Any good thing we have is because of his death and resurrection which brings us into his Kingdom.

Gal. 3:27-29: For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Jesus has abolished any spiritual distinction in the sight of God between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. Anyone who has faith in Jesus is an offspring of Abraham. Through Jesus, we are spiritual Jews.

I believe one of the dominant theological errors of the last 200 years is called dispensationalism. Dispensationalism says that there is a distinction in the eyes of God between Jew and Gentile. That while there is blessing to be had by Gentiles, that's just temporary and what we're waiting for is God to turn back primarily to Jews.

No. The beauty of the gospel is that in Christ we are all one. And the Lord Jesus wastes no time showing that.

What we have here are three miracles that show us the grace of God is poured out on the Gentiles even as it is poured out among the Jews. The grace of God in Christ is toward all mankind. We'll look at the first 2 of these this morning.

1. The Syrophonecian woman.

So Jesus heads out of the Jews section of Israel and heads up to the northern Mediterranean coast. This area was under Roman control at the time of Jesus.

Historically, the area has had a rough relationship with Israel. Things were good enough under the reign of King David - 1,000BC - that when David died the king of Tyre named Hiram entered into a treaty with Solomon to help build the Temple. If you remember David wanted to build a Temple for God, instead of using the Tabernacle. The Lord agree to build a Temple but David couldn't do the building himself because he was a man of war. But David did make plans and begin to gather building supplies for the Temple.

And Solomon - whose name means peace - began to build the Temple and he sourced many of the remaining goods from Hiram, king of Tyre.

At the end of the construction, part of the way Solomon paid Hiram for the goods was to give him control of 20 cities. He basically transferred some of the Kingdom to Hiram's control. But Hiram didn't like the cities. He complained that they weren't up to his standard and it seems like the relationship between Tyre and Israel was strained after that.

What happens from then on is that Tyre becomes unimaginably rich and actually a pagan persecutor of Israel. God condemns the city/nation of Tyre over and over in the OT. Eventually Babylon and later Alexander the Great besiege Tyre and bring all the judgement of God to pass. The siege of Tyre is fascinating from a military standpoint. I would encourage you to go watch a YouTube video for the digital reenactment of the siege.

In any case, God's judgement falls on Tyre over and over for their idolatry and they are cursed as a people in the eyes of the Lord.

That is, until Jesus shows up one day. What's he doing in Tyre? Isn't he the Messiah to the Jews? Why is he here and not Jerusalem or Tiberias? There is nothing religiously significant about Tyre except that it is condemned by God over and over throughout the OT.

What he's doing is bringing grace to the condemned. **Read 24-26**

The theme of Jesus trying to avoid people for some well-needed rest continues. And his inability to get that rest also continues. And he is greeted by a woman. Now, many have pointed here that she basically has 3 strikes against her.

First, she's a woman. Women didn't usually come up to men, certainly not religious leaders. That would be scandalous. If you remember in **John 4** Jesus is talking to the woman at the well in the middle of the day and the disciples are dumbfounded that Jesus would ever be caught dead talking a woman, and especially her. It was not good morals for a religious leader to talk to a woman.

Second, she's a Gentile. Gentiles were unclean; Jews and Gentiles don't associate with each other. Mark says she is a Syrophonecian. The Phonecians were sea-farers along the coast of Israel that developed city/states. Tyre was a city state, as well as others along the coast like Sidon. Matthew calls her a Canaanite - probably a reference to her pagan religion. The description is to help us understand that she is as Gentile as they come and as pagan as they come.

The third strike is that her daughter has a demon, an unclean spirit. And by virtue of her daughter's spiritual plight, she is likely extra unclean as well. At least in the minds of the Jews.

And yet here is Jesus bringing grace to this, very literally, God-forsaken city.

The conversation that ensues is a little unusual for us. But I think it's helpful for us to consider it in light of all of this background. This isn't 21st century USA where we're standing in line for a coffee making small talk and chit chat.

Imagine if a drag queen came up to you in full drag garb asking you to come pray for their child who was being attacked by a demon. That'd be uncomfortable to say the least. That's somewhere in the proximity of discomfort and revulsion Jews had with Gentiles.

But she comes and begs for grace. **Read 26-28**

What a weird conversation. Although this woman is a Gentile pagan, she is coming to Jesus and bows down at his feet and is begging him to do something for her. And I don't know how you emphasize things, but in my mind when I read this it's very dismissive. At first it's "I'm not going to be bothered by you, you dog." And then it seems like "fine, I'll heal her." Almost reluctant.

But that would be to miss the situation. See, Jesus is a master rabbi. And what rabbis would often do with their pupils was to question them and challenge them. They'd create a scenario - often confusing at first - to test their subject. Usually the rabbi would argue the weak side of the argument with the purpose of letting their pupil win the argument.

Now, ironically, we call this type of argumentation "being the devil's advocate." Forgive the expression, but Jesus often played the devil's advocate in argumentation. He wanted his disciples to think and use their minds.

"Who do the people say that I am?" "John the baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets." "But who do you say that I am?" Oh, that's the monumental question. "The Christ the Son of the living God." He makes them rule out all the possibilities before asking the crucial question.

Look at John 3 for just a minute. Here in John 3 we actually see a similar back and forth. The back and forth is between 2 rabbis: Jesus and Nicodemus. Interestingly, Nicodemus does not understand where Jesus is leading him, the Syrophonician did. **Read 1-15**

What is Jesus talking about? Jesus is talking about the radical nature of salvation. It doesn't depend on the person. Salvation - the new birth - is like physical birth. No one chose to be born, that was up to their parents. In the same way, the new birth is up to the Spirit.

Jesus also says salvation - the new birth - is like the wind blowing. We don't know where it comes from or where it goes. No one understands the purpose of the wind. In the same way, no one understands the work of the Spirit.

Jesus fully expects Nicodemus to understand what he's talking about. **Read 9-10**

How does he not get this? You are **the teacher** in Israel? Nicodemus was one of the premier Jewish scholars, well-versed in this question/answer formula and he didn't get this simple illustration.

This back and forth is how rabbis taught. Nicodemus played along, but he didn't understand. **Back in Mark 7** the woman plays along but she understands where Jesus is going and she uses it to her advantage, just like Jesus wants.

Jesus wants his followers to engage; to use their minds. He wants them to fight to get to the truth. That's what he wants from her.

He says, "Let the children be fed what?" First. He's actually throwing her a softball.

What does it mean let the children be fed? Well, she clearly understands that what he's saying is the children are the Jews and the feeding is all the blessings that Jesus is giving to them. They are the ones who get the Messianic blessings - like healing and exorcism - first. Jesus has been healing Jews showing them the Kingdom through preaching.

But he says let them be fed **first**. Which means...there's some left over. There are blessings for the Gentiles to have.

He uses an interesting word for dog here. It's not a mongrel dog, which would have been the typical insult Jews would hurl at Gentiles. He actually softens it here to mean more domesticated dogs. Which still seems like a little bit of a slight, but in God's economy of blessings, Gentiles were unclean dogs.

But here's the amazing thing: she grabs the analogy and runs with it. She's doing exactly what Jesus wants. She's using her mind and pushing the argument. She's persistent.

She's like Abraham arguing with God over how many people to spare in Sodom so his nephew Lot is shown mercy. She's like Gideon throwing out a fleece twice to ensure that God really will bless. She's like Jacob wrestling with angel and not letting up until he blesses him.

And like Jacob, this desperate Gentile woman is arguing face to face with God for the sake of her daughter. And she says, "Fine, you want to call me a dog, I'm dog." In our sin, we're much worse than dogs. But you know what? Even dogs gets the scraps from the dinner table.

Nobody in their right mind would ever prefer their dog over their child, that would be ludicrous. But even sinful people know to take care of their dogs and feed their dogs. If you have a dog, you're going to take care of it. Game, set, match.

Jesus laid down the argumentative challenge, she accepted, and answered exactly as he wanted her. **Read 29-30**

Now, we've already seen what was up to this point arguably Jesus's most impressive exorcism yet when he cast out the Legion of demons. This may actually be more impressive. Why? He doesn't even go to the girl. As God he doesn't have to. He has just as much control over the spiritual world in her presence as he does in her absence. And so he grants the petition.

And guess what? The woman believes him. How do we know? Because she leaves. She takes Jesus at his word.

Two things here. First, Jesus just blessed this Gentile woman with what is now arguably his greatest exorcism yet. This is sovereign spiritual power over demons without even being in the same vicinity. Only God has that power and Jesus just blessed this Gentile woman with that power. The Gentiles aren't actually getting scraps from the table, are they? No; Jesus is giving Gentiles the full Kingdom blessings that the Jews get. All they have to do is ask.

Second, this woman isn't afraid to be called a dog. I mean, in the grand scheme of things our sin makes us much worse than dogs.

Paul says in **1 Cor. 4:13** that we are the scum of the earth, the refuse of all things. Being called a house pet is pretty mild, all things considered.

It doesn't deter her from continuing to ask Jesus for the blessing. A lot of times we give up praying for something because it's not green-lighted immediately. We get a little push back and we fold like a lawn chair.

But Jesus himself tells us to pray like the persistent widow in **Luke 18:1-8**. We pray like persistent children over and over and over until we get what we want or God decisively says no.

2. Let's look at the blind guy. **Read 31-37**

So if you look at the map the Decapolis is the brown area to the southeast of the lake of Galilee; between 3 and 6 o'clock. Decapolis literally means ten cities. Deca = ten; polis = city. Now as time went on there were more than ten cities in the Decapolis, but the region became known as a Roman section of Israel.

Every part was heavily influenced by Rome. When we were in Israel there is a distinct architectural change that happens from northern Galilee area to the Decapolis - you go from walking through all these ancient, small city ruins to feeling like you're walking through ancient Rome or Greece.

It's a completely different world just on the other side of the lake; and the point is that it's just as Gentile as Tyre and Sidon. Jesus has gone from one Gentile area to another Gentile area. And he is again doing to do a wonderful miracle for a Gentile.

And I believe that both the location of Gentile Israel and the miracle, a physical healing, are intentional. If you remember back in chapter 5, Jesus cast out a demon, then healed a woman, then a little later in chapter 6 he fed the 5,000. I think Mark is showing Jesus repeating that same pattern to Gentiles.

But first, note the same kind of scenario unfolds. The crowd begs Jesus to heal this man. He has 2 problems: he's deaf and he has a speaking problem of some kind. We don't know exactly what that means. He could have had a stutter or some stroke like phenomenon. We just don't know.

But there is something very interesting about this word that used here. It's used only once in the NT - here. That's called a hapax legmonon. When a word is only used once in the Bible, it's a hapax legomenon.

If you remember, the NT was originally written in Greek. The OT written mostly in Hebrew, with a few chapters written in Aramaic. But a few hundred years before Jesus the OT was translated into Greek and that translation is called the Septuagint. So the Septuagint is a Greek translation of the OT. And the Septuagint uses this exact word for bad speech exactly 1 time. That's in **Isaiah 35:6**. Turn over there for a minute.

Isaiah has been prophesying judgement against all the nations. God does not ignore the sins of the nations, he will hold them to account and judge them severely. But there's a transition that happens in **Isaiah 35**. The transition is that God will again renew blessings to those that fear him. Even blessings to the nations. We know later that those blessings come about because of Messiah.

But look at this. The exact word is used in **Vs. 5** But I want to read the whole chapter so you get the idea that God is blessing the Gentiles. **Read 1-10**

God promises to reverse the curse against the nations. The dessert will become a garden, the weak will be made strong, the people with bad ears will be unstopped, and there will be a way of holiness established.

These are all pointing to the Messiah - the Suffering Servant of **Isaiah 53** - who will bring blessing to not only Israel but who? The Gentiles.

Turning back to **Mark 7**, there's a reason we haven't heard of Jesus healing deafness or speech problems so far in Mark's gospel. Jesus has healed lame legs, bleeding, fever, sickness, even death. But so far Mark hasn't recorded specifically miracles where Jesus healed deaf people or people with speech problems. Jesus probably had done this, but that's not how Mark frames it.

Now Jesus finally does. And when Jesus does does do this he uses a word that is only used once in the entire Septuagint to describe the man's condition.

That might seem like a stretch, but it doesn't take much for us to recall things with a few words. "Inconceivable." "I am your father." For a lot of us those scenes are burned into our mind.

Well, for those in the first century, these promises of Messianic blessing were burned into their minds. And Mark touches on this passage.

What's the point? The point is that Jesus intentionally showing the Messianic blessing Isaiah promised is coming to the Gentiles in full measure.

And everyone understood the amazement of this. **Read 35-37**

They understood how amazing this was. They got the significance. And we see the irony that the more Jesus tells people to keep it to themselves, the more they tell others.

They can't not tell other people. Mark says they proclaimed it zealously. The word he uses is keyrusso which means to preach. As in preach good news. The Gentiles are preaching fervently that Jesus has brought blessing.

I think this is good for us to be reminded of, especially as Gentiles and especially as we are more conservative theologically. We tend to be a little mum at proclaiming the blessings of God in Christ. We tend to downplay the grace of God even in common things.

But I think our Gentile forefathers are an encouragement. Has Jesus blessed you? Has he given you good things?

Then go zealously proclaim it.

Pray