

“People Were Overwhelmed”

The Twenty-third in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 7:24-37; Isaiah 49:1-7

By now it was obvious that Jesus and the Pharisees were teaching two different things about what it meant to be clean and unclean. For Jesus, uncleanness results from the sinful state of the human heart. In his view, all people (Jew and Gentile alike) are unclean because we are all born as sinners. This is the result of the fall of the human race into sin. As for the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the distinction between clean and unclean was a matter of being in compliance with the oral tradition as taught by the Pharisees. Those who complied with these traditions were considered clean, those who didn't, were considered unclean. While the people of Israel were not quite sure who Jesus was—they were deeply divided about this—those who witnessed the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees knew that the Pharisees and teachers of the law hated Jesus, and that Jesus had managed to confound them at every turn. Now, almost as if to emphasize how little regard Jesus held for the Pharisees unbiblical understanding of human sin and righteous, Mark recounts that Jesus will leave Israel and preach the gospel to the Gentiles in the region to the north of Israel (what is now Southern Lebanon). And here among the Gentiles—regarded as unclean by the Pharisees—Jesus will find a woman of faith, whose response to Jesus stands in complete contrast to the unbelief and hardness of heart of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of Mark, this morning we see Jesus continue to preach the gospel of the kingdom in new areas, this time outside the confines of Israel. After his confrontation with the clueless and hard-hearted religious leaders of Israel, Jesus will now preach the gospel in the area to the north, a trip which will take him to the ancient Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Jesus will then head back inland toward the Sea of Galilee before entering the region called the Decapolis (“ten cities”), which lies to the east of Israel and the Jordan River in what is now the modern nation of Jordan. While there were a number of Jews living in all of these areas, these regions were predominantly Gentile and pagan. The Jews considered these people unclean. As is stated throughout the New Testament (i.e.. Romans 1:16), while Jesus came first to his own people (Israel), it will now become apparent that the kingdom of God does not stop at the border of Israel. Mark now describes Jesus' mission to preach the gospel of the kingdom to Gentiles.

While Jesus had already entered one Gentile region earlier in his ministry (the Gerasenes, where Jesus cast out a legion of demons from some poor demon-possessed man) at this point Jesus now undertakes what some writers have called a “Gentile Mission.”¹ While Mark does not explicitly mention that Jesus preached and performed miracles, it is implied that he did so by the response he received from those who were not Jews. This journey outside of the borders of Israel enables Mark to make several important theological points which serve to reinforce the truth of Jesus' teaching about the human heart upon his return from the wilderness, as Mark has just described.

For one thing, it will become clear that a number of pagan Gentiles responded to Jesus' preaching in faith, so that the contrast between “unclean” Gentiles and the “spotless” Pharisees and teachers of the law becomes self-evident. The religious leaders of Israel are hard of heart, self-righteous and they see

¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 295.

Jesus as a threat. They are filled with pride and view themselves as morally superior to everyone outside their small circle—especially pagan Gentiles. And yet, Mark will recount how a number of Gentiles humble themselves by responding to Jesus in faith.

The irony here is important to understand because this proves Jesus' point made back in the previous verses of chapter 7. The biblical distinction between clean and unclean has to do with the condition of the sinful human heart (which renders all people, Jew and Gentile alike, unclean), and not with the faulty conception held by the Pharisees that righteousness is a matter of what we eat and drink and how we wash our hands. Throughout the cities of Tyre and Sidon and the region of the Decapolis there are pagan and godless Gentiles—people whom the Pharisees and teachers of the law regarded as unclean and therefore beneath contempt. A number of these people come to faith in Jesus, who is Israel's Messiah and yet who is hated by many of those he came to save. Again, we miss much in Mark's gospel if we fail to see that the irony throughout this gospel is both thick and intentional.

Another thing we need to remember as we work our way through this “Gentile mission” section of Mark's gospel is the unanswered question, “just who, exactly, is Jesus?” In the opening chapters of Mark, so far, we gotten the following answers to that question. His own family thinks he's crazy. The people of his home town mock him as the carpenter and the son of Mary. The people of Israel are debating this matter. Some think Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life—Herod Antipas, king of Israel included. Some think he's Elijah (probably the followers of John the Baptist). Others think he is one of the prophets, come back to life. Those who watched him feed 5000 people in the wilderness picked up on the messianic symbolism of that event and were trying to make Jesus king. The scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the law, hate Jesus and were already plotting to kill him. They've said that Jesus is demon-possessed, a sorcerer and a false teacher. And then there are the disciples, who, as Mark puts it in the previous chapter, are still hard of heart and just plain don't get it. Amazingly, the only group so far to recognize Jesus are the demons who identify him as the Son of God—more irony!

So, in light of all of this, Jesus will leave Israel for a time for a number of unspecified reasons. But yet there are some good guesses as to why Jesus would do this, considering everything which has gone on so far. Leaving the area would certainly allow the messianic speculation and the tension with the Jewish religious leaders to die down—Jesus knows that his hour has not yet come. From what we can gather from Mark's “nothing but the facts” description, Jesus will also use this time away from the crowds and on-lookers to rest, regain his strength and to pray. And then there is the most important reason, Jesus will use this time to fulfill messianic prophecy and preach the gospel to the Gentiles—a light will dawn in distant islands.

And so with all of this in mind, we turn to the first part of our text, Mark 7:24-30, and the account of a Gentile woman coming to faith in Jesus.

According to verse 24, it was some time after Jesus returned from the wilderness and had his encounter with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, that “*Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.*” We don't know where “that place” was, but it was likely the area between the Gennesarat and Capernaum, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. In all probability throughout what follows, Jesus was seeking solitude and rest. According to Mark, upon arriving in an area near the city of Tyre, “*He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.*” There are a couple of things here worth noting. A trip to Tyre (about 25 miles to the northwest of Capernaum) would have taken Jesus into ancient Phoenicia across the northern border of Israel. Apparently, Jesus found a room outside the city with the intention of resting. But this was not to be.

Jesus' fame had spread far and wide, even into the Gentile region to the north. Many of the people from this area had made the trip to Galilee in the weeks and months earlier when Jesus was teaching and performing miracles there. Even though Jesus was seeking to be alone, it was not long before people learned that he was in the area. Just as they had in Galilee, desperate people soon swarmed around the area where Jesus had been seen, seeking Jesus because of his miraculous powers and ability to heal the sick and cast out demons. But one person was especially persistent. As we learn in verses 25-26, "*In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.*"

As Mark recounts this event, the emphasis falls squarely upon the fact that this woman was a Gentile, both by birth and by culture.² She was of Greek descent and had been born near Tyre. She probably was Hellenized (Greco-Roman), which meant she was both a Roman citizen and part of what we might call the middle class. She was not a slave nor was she part of the nobility. While we don't know how the woman had come to know of Jesus, she knew that Jesus could help her daughter who was demon-possessed and she was going to do everything in her power to persuade Jesus to rescue her daughter from its clutches. Like their Jewish neighbors to the south, Phoenician Greeks made reference in their writings of that period to demon possession and clearly knew how to distinguish the activity of demons from that of illnesses such as epilepsy.³ It is clear that this woman was in great anguish. She boldly and repeatedly asks Jesus to cast out the demon which had afflicted her daughter. That she fell at Jesus' feet, indicates her great respect for Jesus, and is a sign of mourning due to the gravity of the situation facing her daughter. There was no hope apart from Jesus' compassion.

The dialogue which follows is hard to interpret because there were a number of cultural issues involved which explain why Jesus responds to the woman as harshly as he does. Unless we understand these issues, Jesus' words would seem indicate that he is refusing her request without any consideration of her need. According to Mark, in verses 27-29, the exchange goes as follows when the woman gains an audience with Jesus. "*First let the children eat all they want,' he told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.'* 'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'" On the face of this account, it looks as though Jesus coldly dismisses her as a dog (as a Jewish rabbi or member of the Sanhedrin would dismiss any Gentile).

Here's where the cultural background comes into play. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel are designated "children of God" (cf. Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:6; Isaiah 1:2; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1). The rabbis at the time of Jesus emphasized this very point to explain why it was so important that Jews not become involved with Gentiles. Israel's covenant obligations clearly prevented inter-marriage between Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, Jews were not to form business relationships with Gentiles and without question, Jews were to avoid Gentile markets and foodstuffs because they were considered unclean. Therefore, when Jesus speaks to this woman in the manner in which he does, he is probably assuming that she knew that he was a Jew, and that she knew how Jews felt about

² Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 260.

³ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 261.

Gentiles.⁴ If this was the case, then she knew that Jews considered Gentiles as dogs because they considered themselves to be the children of God.

Like most of the parables of Jesus, this saying has two levels of application.⁵ And so when Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first,” on one level he’s referring to the redemptive historical significance of his own mission. As Israel’s Messiah, he has come first to his own people, Israel. Therefore, he has been feeding the children of God (the people of Israel) through his preaching and miracles and the time has not yet come for Jesus to feed the Gentiles (considered “dogs” by Jews). While Jesus’ messianic ministry is focused upon Israel, his mission to Israel will eventually lead to a much broader ministry to the Gentiles. This is clearly implied in the prophecies from Isaiah which speak of Gentile salvation in the messianic age, such as Isaiah 49:1-7 (our Old Testament lesson this morning). In Isaiah’s prophecy it is clear that the servant of the Lord raises up the tribes of Jacob, before he becomes a light to the Gentiles.⁶ Jesus has indeed come to Israel first, but his mission will eventually lead to Gentile salvation. And so why would a Gentile woman approach Israel’s Messiah, when she mistakenly thought that Jesus would consider her and her daughter as dogs? That she would even do so indicates that she was desperate and that she knew that only Jesus could help her. And so even though Jesus’ mission to Israel was not yet complete, in some ways this event marks an initial phase of Israel’s Messiah becoming a light to Gentiles.

On one level then, Jesus’ parables explain the role of Israel in redemptive history. But the other aspect of these parables is obvious meaning of the story on its face. At this level, it is apparent that Jesus is speaking about something quite obvious. It is wrong to take food intended for the children and waste it by giving it to feed the dogs.⁷ There were a number of so-called “miracle workers” and holy men traveling around during this time. Jesus had come to rest and get away from the crowds. And yet this woman has intruded upon him, something which would have been inappropriate. She may have been seeking Jesus out for all the wrong reasons, the most likely of which is that like many others of her time, she held to some superstitious view of sickness and healing associated with paganism and sought out Jesus because he must be one of these magicians or sorcerers. By answering the way he does, Jesus is therefore testing this woman to see if she had faith that Jesus was sent from Israel’s God, or if she was just another desperate mother, willing to believe or do anything to relieve her daughter’s suffering.⁸

The woman’s response to Jesus’ seemingly harsh answer to her is also quite remarkable. That Jesus’ answer seems to imply that she and her daughter were dogs, does not offend her in the least, nor does it give her pause, even for a moment. In fact, this woman quickly picks up on Jesus’ reply and turns it to her advantage. The woman cleverly replies to Jesus that while children are not to give their food to dogs, nevertheless, the children do drop crumbs from their food and it is OK for the dogs to eat these crumbs. In answering this way, this woman not only acknowledged that Jesus had every right to feed the children first, but she didn’t mind being a dog, so long as she was allowed to enjoy the crumbs.

⁴ Contra Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 262.

⁵ France, The Gospel of Mark, 298.

⁶ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 247.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 262.

⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 262.

Clearly, she did not want to distract Jesus nor interfere with his work. She'd be perfectly happy with whatever help he chose to give her. And the whole time she is doing this she is both deferential and confident that Jesus is still willing and able to help her. This is very likely what Jesus had intended all along by answering her in such an apparently harsh manner. Jesus' mission may indeed be directed to Israel. Jesus will give freely to any Gentile who seeks from him, the blessings of the messianic kingdom. But one thing is now clear. This woman's confidence in Jesus' ability and desire to help her stands in complete contrast to the attitude of the Jewish religious leaders toward Jesus.⁹

It is apparent that Jesus enjoyed her quick and witty answer. She passed the test and demonstrated that she sought Jesus out not because he was a magician or sorcerer, but because as someone sent by Israel's God, he alone could help her. And so as the Greek text says, "on this ground," or "for this reason" Jesus sent the woman home, which was the sure sign that the miracle had been granted to her. As Mark tells us in verse 30, "*She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*" Mark gives us few details of this, but early church tradition tells us that the woman was named Justa and her daughter was named Berenice. Whether true or not, it is indicative of the fact that after the time of Jesus, the early church often knew the identities of those nameless people mentioned in the gospels. No doubt, their presence confirmed the truth of the accounts contained in our canonical gospels.

What is important to Mark is that unlike the scribes, teachers of the law and the Pharisees, a Greek woman sought out Jesus, and as a sign of faith she persisted until Jesus helped her. How different is the faith of this Gentile woman from the hard-hearted and legalistic attitude of the religious leaders of Israel.

Some time after healing this woman, Jesus left the area of Tyre and headed north to Sidon before turning east and heading toward the region of the Decapolis.

Mark simply tells us in verse 31, that "*then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.*" No details are given. Sidon is twenty miles to the north of Tyre and was almost exclusively Gentile. We don't know why Jesus went here, but presumably, it is to preach. At some point, Jesus then headed east through the area governed by Philip and before traveling southeast along the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee into the region known as the Decapolis. There were many more Jews living in the Decapolis region than in Tyre or Sidon, but the territory is considered distinctly Gentile land.

After Jesus entered the Decapolis, we read in verse 32, that "*there some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.*" Again, Jesus' fame has preceded him. No sooner had Jesus arrived in one of these cities, the people saw their opportunity to get help for those who were sick and suffering. And so as soon as Jesus was recognized, desperate people bring their sick and suffering to Jesus. In this case, the man's friends recognized that the laying on of hands was a Jewish custom so as to receive a blessing, and so it is likely that the people were especially amazed when Jesus healed the man, which was much more than they were seeking.

In the instance Mark now recounts, the man in question was deaf and had difficulty speaking, an indication that he had lost his hearing, not that he was born deaf.¹⁰ Mark uses a rare Greek word here for

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 298-299.

¹⁰ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 266.

speech, which is almost certainly an allusion to the Greek translation of the passage in Isaiah 35:5-6, which reads, *“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.* One of the great signs of the messianic age is that Messiah will cause the deaf to hear and to use their tongues to praise God! That Jesus would heal this man in a Gentile region, makes it all the more remarkable. The Messiah heals, because healing is the sign that he alone can forgive sins. And it is Israel’s Messiah who very likely heals a Gentile in a Gentile land.

And so we read that *“After [Jesus] took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!")* . *At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.”* Taking the man away from the crowds and using saliva established a personal contact between Jesus and this man who could not hear him. Jesus looks up to heaven to demonstrate where his power truly lies, and then commands the man’s ears to open. The Greek term translated (deep sigh), demonstrates Jesus’ great emotion and compassion for this poor man.¹¹ Immediately, the man could hear and to prove it began speaking clearly again.

Again, knowing that the reaction from the crowds would be intense and since it was not yet Jesus’ time, he instructs the people not to tell anyone about what had happened. But this too was not to be the case. According to Mark, (verse 36-37), *“Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. ‘He has done everything well,’ they said. ‘He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.’”* The people involved don’t know what to do. They are absolutely amazed by Jesus’ power and compassion. So much so that for the first time, people picked up on the messianic significance of this miracle and applied the words of Isaiah 35:5-6 directly to Jesus. The great irony is that this proclamation comes from people who are likely Gentiles, but possibly Jews, living in a Gentile land. In any case, these words stand in stark contrast to the view of Jesus held by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus makes the deaf hear and the mute speak, the very thing predicated of Israel’s Messiah. And this acknowledgment comes in a pagan and Gentile land and not from the lips of Israel’s own religious leaders and shepherds.

What do we take with us, then, by way of application?

When Jesus leaves Israel and preaches the gospel to the Gentiles, we see that it was Jesus’ intention to preach the gospel to the Gentiles all along. In fact, Isaiah prophesied that islands and distant lands would hear the gospel of the kingdom. *“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. This is what the LORD says— the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: ‘Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.’”* When this persistent woman gains an audience with Jesus, implores him to help her daughter, and Jesus then grants her request, we see salvation has come to the Gentiles and they in turn bow to Israel’s Messiah. The irony is that Gentiles see what the religious leaders of Israel cannot see—that Jesus is sent from God. That is why and how he has the power to heal—not because he is demon-possessed or some kind of sorcerer. This woman is an example to all of us of the need to be both persistent in prayer, while at the same time satisfied with the good things God

¹¹ France, The Gospel of Mark, 303.

gives to us.

When Jesus heals the deaf man in the Decapolis, amazingly, it is the people who spontaneously apply to Jesus the words of Isaiah 35:5-6 (a messianic prophecy), *“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”* While these people may be Jews, they may also be Gentiles, and for sure, they live in a Gentile land. The contrast between these people and the religious leaders of Israel could not be greater. These people were overwhelmed by the grace and mercy of Israel’s God, while the Pharisees and teachers of the law were seeking ways to put Jesus to death.

The point is that Jesus is absolutely right about the distinction between clean and unclean as being a matter of the human heart. And since the true condition of the human heart is sinful, and since this is not a matter of religious rules and regulations, God must save sinners by grace through faith, if any are to be saved. From this account it is clear that Jesus sees the kingdom of God as extending to distant islands, and to people of every race and standing in life. There are no ethnic or cultural barriers attached to the gospel, despite what the Pharisees had been teaching. It is Jesus’ Gentile mission therefore, which becomes the basis for the church’s mission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. When we take the gospel to the ends of the earth, we see a light dawn among the Gentiles in distant islands.

Therefore, it is the message of Christ and him crucified which brings people to faith and which overcomes the uncleanness which lies in the sinful human heart. The gospel has nothing to do with the pharisaical message that we must eat certain foods, perform certain ceremonies and wash our hands in a particular way, or else we are unclean. Imagine for a moment, if you will, if the Pharisees were right. What would become of us? We would be Gentiles dogs, with no hope of heaven, confined to a state of uncleanness. Thus when Jesus takes the gospel beyond the borders of Israel and preaches the kingdom of God to Gentiles, all barriers between races and cultures are gone. Jesus overwhelmed both Jew and Gentiles with his grace and mercy. Just as he has overwhelmed those of us who believe and confess him to be Lord out here in the distant islands, where we see his light dawn in our midst. Amen.