

READ Mark 7:17-23

During our studies through Mark's Gospel this year, I have made a very concerted effort to make sure that I am stressing what Mark seems to be stressing in the composition of this Gospel account. I have suggested that Mark's nearly singular effort in this Gospel account is to give strong evidence for his thesis of Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God. **(1:1)** He begins by establishing John the Baptist, through the words of Isaiah, as the prophesied forerunner for the Messiah who baptizes Jesus in the opening verses of the Gospel account. He then shows Jesus going throughout the area of Galilee collecting disciples, teaching in the synagogues, casting out unclean spirits, and healing the sick and broken. Many of the crowds were impressed by the teaching and power displayed by Jesus, but there were some who were less than impressed and even stood in opposition to Him. The religious leaders are often found to stand in opposition to Jesus though their rejection of His miraculous signs and teachings, their rebuking of His disciples, and they even tried to accuse Him of being in league with satanic forces.

We might to some extent understand the attacks on Jesus and His disciples from the standpoint of these religious leaders. He was speaking (and with authority!) in their synagogues without having gone through either of their religious schools (Hillel or Shemmai). He and His disciples were going against the commonly respected practices of the religious leaders, and He even went so far as to rebuke the way they went about practicing their religious by demanding more than simple rote practice.

You would think that the treatment experienced by Jesus's disciples at the hands of the religious leaders would cause them to draw closer to Jesus, but in actuality they found themselves sometimes opposed to Jesus themselves, or at least they were not always in sync with Him and what he was trying to do or teach. Remember that they were just as confused as others when Jesus spoke in parables in **chapter 4**. Further in that chapter they astonished and confused as to who Jesus was by Him being able to calm the storm. Mark even goes so far as to describe the disciples as being hard-hearted **(6:51,52)** in response to Jesus's miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and being afraid when seeing Jesus walking on the water in the middle of the storm **(6:30-52)**. We might also throw in that Jesus's own family and closest associates in Nazareth rejected Him **(6:1-6)**.

I believe that Mark is setting up his Gospel account in such a way that these rejections of Jesus stand out clearly to us as we read through this text. He wants us to see that though there are many who see what Jesus is doing and are impressed with His incredible nature to the point of belief, there are many who are in positions where they are nearer, in a sense, to the Lord whose rejection and disbelief only leaves us scratching our heads.

Our previous study in **7:1-23** showed us hard-heartedness and lack of understanding on the part of both the religious leaders and the disciples, and the final section as recorded by Mark focuses on the heart of the matter of faith, and leaves us with a little taste for what is to come within Jesus's kingdom. Jesus is strongly emphasizing the necessity of the heart when it comes to religious devotion, and in the process He sets up what is to come in the kingdom where the dietary code of the Law will no longer be in play. Those dietary laws had been in force to make a clear distinction between the chosen family of God in the Israelites and the surrounding nations, but with them being gone...where would the distinction now lie?

Let me suggest that the only distinction that now exists between those who are near and far from God is the issue of faith and trust in Jesus. We have seen those who ought to be near to God actually being far away because of their lack of belief, and Mark is about to show us the very reversal of those truths by bringing into the picture those who were thought to be far away...but were actually right there with Jesus because He sought to draw them to Himself on the basis of faith and trust. Let's read and examine the text of **Mark 7:24-8:10** this morning, and let me ask you to keep in mind that there is no distance that stands between us and God that Jesus cannot overcome through our faith and trust in Him.

GOD Mark 7:24-8:10

A. The Faith of a Gentile Mother (Mark 7:24-30)

1. Following His dispute with the Pharisees and struggles with His own disciples, we find Jesus departing from the area of Gennesaret and going into the region of Tyre (Sidon is also included in the description depending on the translation). This is interesting because this would be only the second time that Jesus has ventured outside of Jewish territory doing His ministry up to this point. The first time was in **chapter 5**, and He will actually revisit that location in the next section we'll consider momentarily. For now, Jesus finds Himself some 35-40 miles away from Galilee, and it seems as if He is again trying to find a place where He might find some time for a reprieve. He goes into a house, but even that house granted to anonymity because people continued to notice and recognize who He was. That truly is an incredible thing considering this was Gentile territory. Why would these Gentiles care about this Jewish teacher? Surely His reputation had preceded Him!
2. Nevertheless, a particular woman comes to Jesus. She is identified as a Gentile, specifically a Syrophoenician by birth which simply emphasizes her Gentile background. Mark tells us that she heard about Jesus and came throwing herself at His feet on behalf of her daughter who was controlled by an unclean spirit. She is imploring Jesus that He might come to the aid of her daughter, but Jesus doesn't jump at the opportunity to serve this woman at all. Instead, He shares with her a parable. Now, many people have taken Jesus's words here as a direct insult towards this woman by calling her a dog. Let me suggest that this is no insult, but a test through this parable. It is also good to mention that this is not the first time we can find a great prophet of God giving such a test of faith to a Gentile woman from this particular region of the world. Elijah can be found in this similar situation in **I Kings 17:8-16**.
3. It has been attested since the Old Testament that God's Messiah would be coming to redeem and restore the people of Israel. They were the chosen covenant people of God whom He would use to bring about the Messiah and the great times of redemption, and it was to this people on which the Messiah would first focus. Therefore, the Hebrews are the children to whom the bread would first go to make sure they are taken care of. This woman and by extension all Gentiles are represented by the dogs who are seen as not initially being the focus.
4. However, let's again tie in the fact that Jesus is now in Gentile territory after having clearly emphasized what made someone righteous before God was the content of their hearts and not some external attributes like a diet...or washings...or circumcision...or lineage. What a coincidence that He just so happens to now come into the land of the people who have none of those things. Actually, I don't see this as a coincidence at all. Instead, I see this as Jesus searching far and wide to see who would believe and trust in Him, and He is sharing this parable as a way to do the very same thing as He did back in **chapter 4**...to see who would seek Him in belief and trust.
5. This woman seems to understand well the purpose of what Jesus was doing because she takes Jesus's very parable and words uses them to formulate a solid response, *"Lord, even the dogs under the table, eat the children's crumbs."* She understands that the Gentiles are not the preliminary beneficiaries of the work of the Messiah, but she is confident in the goodness of God and Jesus to the point that she believes the Messiah's very presence is good for everyone! Even the lowly Gentiles who have been so far away from God for so long. Jesus is certainly impressed by her faith displayed in this answer that He tells her to go on home to her daughter who has been healed. But let's not forget what seems to have driven Jesus to this place of the Gentiles...the disbelief of the Jewish leadership. Surely their messy behavior had left plenty of crumbs for the Gentiles to gain great benefit based upon their willingness to belief and trust in Jesus.

B. Gentile Ears Opened & Tongue Loosened (Mark 7:31-37)

1. Following His interaction with the believing Gentile woman, Jesus leaves the region of Tyre and goes to the region of the Decapolis. We have once before seen Him in this area back in **chapter 5** and should remember that He again had interactions with Gentiles on that occasion. It was so much known as a Gentile area that Weirsbe notes it was referred to as the "*Rome away from Rome.*" It is while Jesus is here in this area that He is again met with a Gentile who is in great need. This man who is brought to Him is described as being deaf and having great difficulty with speaking. He is brought here by other people, but Jesus wants to get this man out of the public light so that he might not become a spectacle to others.
2. In private Jesus takes this man, puts His fingers in this man's ears, spits, and then touches the man's tongue. As He is doing this, He looks up to heaven, lets out a deep sigh, and then says, "*Ephphatha!*" Which is translated, "*be opened!*" Mark lets us know that immediately this man was healed of his disabilities. Specifically, it is said that "*his ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak clearly.*" This man was experiencing in a physical sense exactly what Jesus had come to this earth to do for mankind in a spiritual sense. The Messiah was sent by God to bring release for mankind from the great ills that ailed them through the curse of sin.
3. What is the response of those who now know what Jesus has done for this man? Jesus tells them that they need to keep hush about it, but Mark explains that the more Jesus told them to be quiet, the more they were sharing it with others. This Gospel is a Gospel of action, and so often we find those who have been blessed by Jesus taking that message out to the world around them. They did this because they were so astonished by what He had done. "*He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.*" Of course, this was done as a sign of His Messiahship and the times that had come upon the earth. We have often noted the connections in Mark to the prophet Isaiah, and once again the great prophet in **Isaiah 35:4-10** points out that this is exactly what would take place when the Messiah would arrive on the scene. They recognized His greatness and spoke of Him in ways that would surely bring to mind the power of God Himself who in the beginning made everything good and did it well.

C. Gentile Hunger Satisfied (Mark 8:1-10)

1. And yet, it is the action of Jesus with this man and the response of those who knew of His actions that seemingly led to a large crowd once again gathering around Jesus in this area of the Decapolis. As we have seen previously in **chapter 6**, Jesus has compassion upon this crowd (which surely must have been made up of at least some Gentiles), and He desires to feed them since they had already been with Him for three days. He doesn't want to send them home since some of them had come from a great distance. Is it possible that some had come from Tyre after hearing what Jesus had done for the Gentile woman there? This is possible, but we can't know for certain.
2. What we are made aware of for certain is that the disciples are still not understanding the true nature of Jesus. We can come to that conclusion based upon the fact that they have the exact same response to this opportunity to feed a multitude as they had back in **chapter 6**. Again, they question Jesus as to how they could get enough food to feed all of the people out in this desolate place. I see this response from the disciples, and my mind goes immediately back to **7:34** where Jesus sighs in regards to the situation. There I believe Jesus is sighing because of the curse of sin that is obvious in this man's life, but I wonder if there isn't some sighing there because of the hardness of the hearts of other men. We can know their hardness could cause such from Jesus because we're going to see it in **8:12** in our next study, but I wonder if Jesus is sighing and wishing it were so simply in regards to opening the ears, mouths, eyes, and

hearts of those who should have been the first to acknowledge Him for who He truly was. Here, once again, the disciples of Jesus simply don't get it. They lack in understanding.

3. Even with their continued lack of understanding and belief, nearly the exact same routine is repeated as we saw in the previous feeding of the multitude. Jesus takes just a little food and miraculously multiplies it into enough food to feed this multitude of 4,000 people. Likewise, the exact same result is mentioned as we saw back in **6:42** as Mark writes, ***"They ate and were satisfied."*** (8:8) What is the significance of these words? They show us, as do the previous two stories that Jesus's blessings were not reserved only for the Jewish people who were near to God through the covenant, but they were intended to be enjoyed by all people, even those who were far away from God by being outside of the covenant of Moses. Again thinking upon the words of the prophet Isaiah, think about the many references to the ***"nations"*** and ***"many peoples"*** in **Isaiah 2:1-4**.
4. For those who were closest to Jesus, knew what to look for, saw what He did, and yet refused to believe in Him...Jesus would simply look elsewhere, even to those who were furthest away. We have a small sampling of that happening during His ministry, but the fullness of the salvation to the Gentiles would certainly be seen in just a few years as the Gospel was taken into the whole world.

YOU Application Question

- A. Do I realize that Jesus's power can overcome any distance that I might have created because of my sin?
 1. One of the struggles that some people have when it comes to faith in God is that they just can't believe that there is anyway that God would be willing to draw them to Himself because they have lived so deeply in the pits of sin. They believe they are too far away and cannot be brought near to God.
 2. However, let me remind us all that an actual Apostle was guilty of some pretty heinous sins against God's very people, and yet he was shown mercy by God and given a place within the kingdom. Paul writes in **I Timothy 1:12-17** that the patience of Jesus is beyond comprehension because even he as ***"the worst"*** of sinners was shown mercy. Paul's change in life stands as the ultimate example that no one is too far gone from God if they're willing to do what is necessary to be brought back into closeness and fellowship with Him.
- B. Am I willing to completely humble myself before God if I realize my need to come back to Him because I've drifted far away?
 1. We've all heard it discussed as to whether or not someone who is a Christian can lose their salvation by falling back into the world and living unfaithful towards God. While I can appreciate those who are truly searching for the truth on this matter, there is only one place that we would truly need to look to in regards to the truth and that place is the Letter to the Hebrews. Within the page of that letter there are warnings after warnings as to the dangers of drifting away from the faith. (**Hebrews 2:1; 3:12-14; 4:1**)
 2. Therefore, the question then becomes, ***"What should I do if I do find myself far away from God?"*** The answer can be seen in the lives of these people we have read about this morning. They came to Jesus and completely humbled themselves before Him. They had nothing to give Him except their belief, their trust, and themselves. When they fully humbled themselves before Him, He responded joyfully and faithfully to their belief, and He will continue to do so today. The words of **I John 1:9** continue to ring true today, ***"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** The distance we have created cannot keep us away from God if we will humbly repent because His power can overcome any and every sin.

Main Point/Conclusion: *There is no distance that Jesus can't overcome through our faith and trust.*

WE

It can be so frustrating to read of the hard hearts and disbelief of those who truly should have known better when it came to the true nature and identify of Jesus. And yet, it is stories like these within Mark's Gospel that remind us that the truth is there to be believed if we will simply humble ourselves to do so. Hard hearts continue to be that which created distance between men and their God. May we strive day to live humbly before our Lord and guard against hard unbelieving hearts. He desires to draw us ever closer, no matter the distance, if we will live faithfully and humbly before Him.