



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“A Way That Is Open”
Sermon Series: “The Way of Jesus”

Mark 7:24-37

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(New International Version)

The Faith of a Syrophenician Woman

²⁴Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.^[a] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil^[b] spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷"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."

²⁸"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

The Healing of a Deaf and Mute Man

³¹Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.^[c] ³²There 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.

³³After he 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. ³⁴He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!").

³⁵At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 7:24](#) Many early manuscripts Tyre and Sidon
- b. [Mark 7:25](#) Greek unclean
- c. [Mark 7:31](#) That is, the Ten Cities

Introduction.

I have been amazed by the stories of rescue which came out of the tragedy of the earthquake in Haiti last month. Lorie and I saw one account of a woman who had been trapped in the rubble for 6 days. Here's a video by CNN on her dramatic rescue: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMf2Eh97Re4>.

Any of us who have ever been lost or shut in somewhere can identify with this story. We yearn for a way out, a way that is open to us, and there is such joy when we find it. In the passage before us this morning, we encounter two people who were looking not for a physical way out but for a spiritual way out. They were not Jewish; both were Gentiles. One was a woman from Syrophenicia and the other a deaf man from the region of the Decapolis, which means Ten Cities.

In the preceding passage in the gospel of Mark, Jesus broke with the Jewish oral tradition of the elders, especially as it relates to ceremonial purity. Here Christ breaks with the tradition, which says that Jews should have no relationship with Gentiles because it was considered that associations with



them made Jews ritually unclean in the eyes of God. They were so focused on issues of purity, they restricted their social interactions and developed racial pride. In these amazing stories of rescue, Jesus provided an opportunity for two people who desperately needed a way out.

I. A Way Is Opened For Deliverance.

The first occasion Jesus demonstrated a new way open in the Kingdom of God had to do with a Greek woman with a troubled little girl. There is every reason to believe this woman had no hope in finding help for her little girl from Jesus. She had three strikes against her – she was a Gentile, she was a woman, and Jesus was looking for a time to rest from His busy schedule.

A. The Travels of Jesus. Our Lord and His disciples left Gennesaret and traveled north to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre was 40 miles north-west of Capernaum. Its name means *The Rock*, and it was called this because off the shore lay two great rocks that were joined by a 3,000 ft. long ridge. This formed a natural breakwater, and Tyre became one of the great natural harbors of the ancient world from the earliest times. Sidon was 26 miles north-east of Tyre and 60 miles north of Capernaum. Like Tyre, it had a natural breakwater, too, and its origin as a harbor and a city was so ancient that no one even knew who founded it.

Jesus probably traveled north for an escape. The scribes and Pharisees branded Him a sinner because He and His disciples broke their rules and regulations. Herod Antipas regarded Him with fear and thought that He was John the Baptist come back from the dead. The townspeople of His hometown of Nazareth treated Him with disrespect and unbelief. So it is not surprising to find Him seeking the peace and quiet of seclusion.

However, the rejection of the Jews had become the opportunity for the Gentiles. Jesus could not keep His presence a secret, and word of His arrival spread like wildfire.

B. The Request of the Woman. One of the people who sought out Jesus was a woman born in a place called Syrian Phoenicia. Phoenicia was the area of what is today Lebanon. In those days Phoenicia belonged administratively to the country of Syria, hence the name. This woman had a little daughter that was possessed by an evil spirit, and she fell at Jesus' feet and begged Him to drive the demon out.

C. The Conversation They Had. Our Lord's response appears rather harsh at first blush. Jesus said, *"First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (27).* Was our Lord rude and insensitive to this woman and her need? A closer look at the passage reveals there is more than meets the eye.

The word "dog" was sometimes used by the Jews as a term of contempt for Gentiles, and some scholars think that is what Jesus meant here. However, Christ did not use the usual word people normally did when referring in a derogatory way to Gentiles. Rather, Jesus used a diminutive form of the word which described not the wild dogs of the street but little lap-dogs who were kept as household pets. In the Greek language diminutives are characteristically affectionate, so the Lord actually took the sting out of the word in what He said to the woman (or perhaps we could say the "bite" out of the dog!).

Here the Lord was not closing the door to her request completely. Instead, He said first the children should be fed. There will be meat left over for the household pets. In other words, Israel had the first offer of the gospel, but there would come a time when other offers to the rest of the world would come later. At the time of Jesus, people did not use knives, forks and napkins. They ate with their hands, and they wiped their soiled hands on chunks of bread which they then gave to their pets. So the woman replied, *"Yes, Lord,"* (the only time "Lord" appears in the gospel of Mk.) *"but even*



the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (28). In other words, "I know the children are to be fed first (the gospel is for the Jews first), but can't I even get the scraps the children throw away for my little girl? (can't you do something for us Gentiles?")

Jesus loved her response. William Barclay has written, *"Here was a sunny faith that would not take no for an answer, here was a woman with the tragedy of an ill daughter at home, and there was still light enough in her heart to reply with a smile. Her faith was tested and her faith was real, and her prayer was answered. Symbolically she stands for the Gentile world which so eagerly seized on the bread of heaven which the Jews rejected and threw away."*ⁱ

D. The Healing That Occurred. The woman admitted her status, but she refused to believe she was thereby excluded from any benefits. The woman's response revealed to Jesus not only her wit but also her faith and humility. Christ responded by declaring that for such an answer her daughter had been healed, and the demon had left the little girl. This is the only instance of healing at a distance found in Mark's gospel. The woman returned home and discovered the truth of what Jesus had said. Her daughter was freed, and she found a way open to her in their time of need.

II. A Way of Hearing and Speaking for the Deaf Man.

Next Jesus traveled north from Tyre through Sidon, and then apparently he journeyed in a southeasterly direction through the territory of Herod Philip to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and into the territory of the Decapolis. The Decapolis was a grouping of ten cities that was largely Greek, and Jesus had been there once before when He delivered the Garasene demoniac back in chapter 5. (Remember the bay of pigs incident!? Someone has suggested that it was the first instance of "devil'd ham"!)

A. The Ailment of the Man. A man who was deaf and could hardly talk was brought to Jesus, and the people begged him to heal the man. Being deaf or hard of hearing can be awfully troubling. There was once an elderly couple who were having their breakfast one morning. He was shuffling around and finally came to the table. The sweet smell of coffee was in the air. He looked at her, and she looked at him. The he reached over and touched her hand and said, "Sweetie, I'm proud of you." Hard of hearing, she looked at him and said, "I'm tired of you too!"

This man was deaf and could hardly speak, and the people begged Jesus to do something for him.

B. The Healing Method of Jesus. Our Lord took the man apart from the crowd. Apparently, He wanted to have personal contact with him, and Christ focused the man's attention. Then the Lord utilized some very strange actions which appear to have been done in order to help the man exercise his faith. Jesus placed his fingers in the man's ears to indicate they were to be unblocked, and He placed saliva on his finger and touched the man's tongue to indicate it was going to be restored to its normal use. Then Jesus looked up to heaven, to indicate to the man that his healing would come from above, and said, "*Ephphatha!*" which means "be opened!" in Aramaic.

John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, wrote the following about this passage: *"The laying on of hands would of itself have been sufficiently efficacious, and even, without moving a finger, he might have accomplished it by a single act of his will; but it is evident that he made abundant use of outward signs, when they were found to be advantageous. Thus, by touching the tongue with saliva, he intended to point out that the faculty of speech was communicated by himself alone; and by putting his fingers in the ears, he showed that it belonged to his office to pierce the ears of the deaf."*ⁱⁱ

C. The Effect On The Crowd. The effect of the command was instantaneous, and the man's ears were opened. His tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. Jesus ordered the crowd not to tell



anyone, but the more He insisted on this, the more they spread the word about this miracle. They said, *"He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

When our Lord came to the earth, bringing healing to broken bodies and salvation to lost souls, He began the work of creation all over again. In the beginning at creation, everything that was made was very good, but sin spoiled it all. Now Jesus was bringing back the beauty of God to the world and a restoration to that which had been so badly damaged. A way was opened for this man for whom all of life had only been silence before.

III. A Way for Us to Follow Jesus.

Notice the way Jesus came alongside these people at their own points of need and the way He accommodated Himself to them. Our Lord treated each person as an individual. With the Syrophenician woman, He freed her daughter from a distance; with the deaf mute He utilized a graphic demonstration of touch to communicate the healing. Jesus never dealt with two different people the same way. He accommodated and personalized His love to each one of them.

I once read about a doctor who was preparing to perform surgery on a young woman to remove a growth from her face. It was fairly deep in the skin, and the surgeon warned her of the risks of the operation. The woman asked him if it would affect the way she looked, and he explained that the particular growth was very near and perhaps directly on an important nerve that affected her mouth. There was indeed a chance that the operation would affect the shape of her mouth if the nerve was damaged. The patient knew that she needed the operation, and she realized she was taking a dangerous but necessary risk.

During the operation, the surgeon was as careful as was humanly possible, but given the location of the growth, he also knew that the nerve had been severed in the operation. He visited with the woman in her hospital room the next day, and she asked him for a mirror. He reported to her what had happened during surgery as he handed her a small oval mirror. She took one look and began to cry. Her mouth curved downward on the left side toward her chin. "Will I always look like this?" she asked. "I'm afraid so. I wish there was something that I could do to help."

And then the most wonderful thing happened. The woman's husband was standing there in the room. The doctor hadn't even noticed him there before. He stepped to the bed and said, "I think it looks kind of cute." He bent over, and, shaping his lips to conform with the misshapen form of hers, he kissed her.

The doctor thought to himself, "What a picture of love. And what a picture of God's love for us. Our gracious Lord accommodates Himself to us in our difficulty, and He meets us at our own points of need. What a picture of love."

This passage also reminds us that when God opens a way, He leads into mission, sometimes in ways we had not planned. Jesus encountered this woman and explored the mission to the Gentiles in a place He did not expect, the city of Tyre. He encountered the deaf mute in the Decapolis, an area where previously they pleaded with Him to leave. God often leads us into mission in ways we had not planned.

The First Presbyterian Church of San Antonio is a sister congregation to Westlake Hills. A former pastor there once told me they never really intended to get involved with the homeless. Sure they were a downtown church, but working with the homeless was the job of agencies and other people with whom they partnered. They wrote checks, they provided funding, but they never intended to get involved personally. That was until a homeless man died on the steps of their church one Wednesday night.



The next morning, the men's bible study arrived to gather as they did every Thursday morning, and as they entered the church building, they had to walk over and around the dead homeless man, thinking he was asleep. It was only later that day they discovered, to their shock, that the man was actually dead, and it hit them all in a profound way.

Lewis Stumberg, an elder in the church, was one of the men in this bible study, and he raised the question about what the church should do for the homeless of the city. That question led to the purchase of 100 cots to be placed in the gym where the homeless could sleep. Then along with 10 other downtown churches, they built a shelter for the homeless. They got involved personally in staffing it. The mission of that church to the city has grown to the point where they are personally engaged in deep and diverse ways with the homeless of San Antonio.

My friends, when we fully give ourselves to Christ, it will surprise us to see the way in which the Lord calls us to reach outside our comfort zone. That is always God's call to the believer. And when we respond to that call, when we are open to His leading, a way opens for others and for us. It all happens when the need becomes obvious.

How have your ears been stopped up from hearing the Lord, like the deaf man in the Decapolis? In what ways have you been mute about Jesus? Where do you need the touch of the Savior this morning? Do you realize that one person can make a difference? And will you be that one to help make a way open for those who have never heard? May we be attentive to what God may want to say to us today and in the coming week in this regard. Amen.

ⁱWilliam Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p.179.

ⁱⁱJohn Calvin, *A Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol. 2, pp.271-272.

