

Kingdom Advancement: Salvation Beyond Barriers

Mark 7:24-37

If you were a Jew living in the 1st century, you were living as a conquered people.

Think about that for a moment. What would it be like to live under the thumb of foreign invaders? We haven't experienced anything like that here in America so it's hard to fathom. But imagine seeing the invading soldiers walking through the streets. Imagine using the currency of the invaders and having a leader who was put in place by an emperor living thousands of miles away.

This was the situation in Israel during the time of Jesus. But the Jewish people had all these promises from God that this was their land and they were God's special people. So, certain of the Jews tried their best to keep as pure and clean as they could by rigorously applying the OT law and even making a fence around it to ensure they were honoring God. Nearly every Jewish person had some expectation that God would return to His people by sending a deliverer who would free them from Gentile oppression. The Jews were not to embrace Gentiles, they were to be distinct from Gentiles.

But, when Jesus came to earth as the Messiah, he shook up the Jewish conception of what the Messiah would be and this is why even his disciples had such trouble embracing him. Jesus broke through certain barriers that were unexpected and he did this in order to bring deliverance to his people and to the world. And today we want to talk about a couple of those barriers.

If you remember from the last two weeks in Mark 7 Jesus has been teaching on what truly defiles a person or what is truly wrong with us and it's found, not in externals but in the heart. The Jews had put up these traditions that very often functioned to exclude people from God's covenant grace. They had essentially raised barriers to keep uncleanness out and purity in and we want to see Jesus knock down these barriers today. So, in Mark 7:24-37 we are going to see 2 barriers that Jesus breaks to bring salvation.

1. Ethnic Barrier

We saw last time that the Pharisees were very concerned over washing of hands and foods. If foods made you unclean then certainly being a Gentile put you on the outside. The Pharisees and Scribes wanted to exclude those from the

blessings of Israel who were not "clean." But look what Jesus does in verse 24. Now, if you aren't familiar with the geography of Israel during this time look at this map to see the location of Tyre. This was clearly outside of the nation of Israel and was actually one of the most pagan or Gentile places imaginable to the Jews.

One Jewish historian said that the people of Tyre were "notoriously our bitterest enemies." The Jewish expectation was that when God's deliverer would come he would expel Gentiles and foreigners and not embrace them. But notice what happens in verse 25 when he arrives. He couldn't be hidden and a woman comes and finds him. Notice the specifics about this woman at the end of verse 25 and verse 26.

Now, there's probably not a character in the gospel of Mark who has more stacked against her than this woman. She's a woman, a Gentile, and not just a Gentile, but a Syrophoenician and she has a daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit. Notice how Mark uses the word "unclean" here to tie this back to the previous story regarding unclean and clean foods.

The point is that this woman was clearly on the outside. But notice the way she approaches Jesus at the end of verse 25 and the end of verse 26. She comes and falls at the feet of Jesus and begs him to heal her daughter. Mark is describing her heart here. She obviously has all the demerits of uncleanness stacked against her, but her heart is positioned rightly before Jesus.

So how does Jesus respond? Not as we would expect. Look at verse 27. This is offensive in many ways. Jesus seems to be dismissing the woman's need and calling her a dog because she is a Gentile. Who can blame a mother for begging for help from a man who obviously has the capability to help? Why this cold and callous response? Haven't we come to expect compassion of Jesus?

We have, but there's a couple of things happening here. First, keep in mind the entire context. We have just seen Jesus talk about how true defilement comes from the heart and so we expect the reverse of that as well; true faith comes from the heart and this woman seems to be exhibiting faith. Jesus isn't reversing his stance on true defilement and telling her that her ethnicity will prohibit her from receiving grace.

Notice a couple of things about His words. If the Gentiles were understood as dogs here then the children can be understood as the Jews. This would have been the normal Jewish self-designation. I think Jesus is almost playing the devil's advocate here and parroting the very typical Jewish belief of the day. But, even as he does this, notice he uses the word "first." There is an order to this. God's Word and Son comes to the Jewish people and then expands outward to the Gentiles.

But here's what many of the Jews were missing. God's grace does extend out to the Gentiles! He isn't just the deliverer for the Jewish people. Salvation is not based on ethnicity or birth family. It's based on faith and notice how this woman responds in verse 28.

Jesus has spoken in a parable of Jews and Gentiles using the metaphors of children and dogs. This woman enters into the world of the parable and responds with a great deal of understanding. She accepts the terms of the view of reality given by Jesus in this parable and places her life within it. This is what Jesus has meant throughout Mark when he gives a parable and calls for faith. You have to accept the reality of the parable, enter into it, and respond in faith. Jesus recognizes that this is true faith. Look what he says in verse 29.

Even the disciples haven't been able to do this with a parable yet. We saw just last week that they couldn't grasp the parable Jesus told. But this woman, this Gentile woman, from a pagan town, with an unclean daughter understands more about the ministry of Messiah than his own disciples do!

The Messiah was never supposed to be limited to the Jewish people. Listen to a couple of OT promises. Genesis 12:1-3. Isaiah 42:1. And here we see this happening. Look at verse 30.

Now, what can we learn from this wonderful little story? First, ethnicity was a dividing line during the time of Jesus and because of man's sinfulness it seems to never be far from us. Let me make this as clear as I can in light of Christ's actions here toward Gentiles. Jesus values racial harmony and the unity of different ethnicities within the body of Christ and therefore, we should as well. This is not a political issue. It's a gospel issue. Christ's kingdom encompasses people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Listen to how the throne room of heaven is described in Revelation 5:9-10.

Racism is satanic and believers ought to do everything within our power to accurately reflect our Savior's love for those made in his image.

Let me just encourage you that we have the opportunity right here in our city to live out God's love for the nations. I was at a pastor's lunch this week where I met a man from Bangladesh who is doing mission work among Muslims in Hamtramck. He told us that Hamtramck is only 2.5 square miles of land and there are 84 languages spoken in it! 84! This is the heartbeat of the Great Commission, except now the concept of going is a lot easier. We don't have to go to Yemen. Yemen, Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, and many other countries are coming to us.

So, the first barrier we see here is the ethnic barrier and we'll see this again next week, but let's move to our second barrier found in verses 31-37.

2. Brokenness Barrier

Now, what do I mean by this? We've seen throughout Mark just how shattered our world is. People are broken, battered and bruised spiritually and physically. Here we meet a man who is so broken he can't even interact with Jesus. Look at the journey of Jesus in verse 31.

We've seen Jesus in the Decapolis before, this is where he healed the demon possessed man in the tombs. This is a Gentile region and so Christ's mission among those outside Israel continues. Look at verse 32.

This man is so broken he can't even bring himself to Jesus. He may not even be aware of Jesus because he can't hear or interact with those around by speaking. He's a Gentile, on the outside and unable to do anything for himself.

Look at what Jesus does in verse 33. First, he takes the man aside from the crowd. This miracle isn't done for show or to prove a point to the crowd. This is genuine compassion on this man. Jesus treats him as an individual deserving of kindness. Also notice that we get intense details about how Jesus heals him. Look back at verse 33. This is quite a bit of touch here. He puts his fingers in his ears and spits on his tongue, obviously the two problem areas. Why?

Jesus doesn't shy away from this man's brokenness. He deals with it even though this man was no doubt ritually unclean and to touch someone's saliva would normally cause uncleanness. We've seen before in Mark that when Jesus comes in

contact with those who are unclean, it doesn't cause him to be unclean but the other person to become clean.

Jesus's compassion continues. Look at verse 34. Jesus sighs or groans here. Why? We don't know for sure, but this same word is used in Romans 8:22-23. Listen to this verse. It's also used in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4. Both passages are talking about the temporal difficulties we face while living in this broken world under the curse of sin. Both passages also point out that we groan in these bodies, not just to complain, but out of a sense of longing for the future when we will be free from the damage inflicted by sin. We long for that time because we have the Spirit, who is like the down payment and proves that the fullness of the kingdom is coming. But it's not here yet.

Jesus was surrounded by that brokenness and it caused him to groan. **Things are not supposed to be like this.** Men are not supposed to be unable to hear and speak in the world Jesus created. But keep in mind we are talking about how Jesus smashes through barriers and notice what he says at the end of verse 34. And now look at the results in verse 35.

The ESV says his tongue was released. It literally means his bonds, fetters, or chains were released. Christ brings freedom from brokenness and this is what his kingdom looks like. As you think about Jesus speaking these words, "Be opened," there's every reason to believe these would have been the first words this man ever heard. His ears are opened to hear and his mouth begins to speak. He's functioning as a full human being should, as God intended it in the Garden of Eden.

But you see, as we have come to discover in the book of Mark, miracles like this aren't just recorded to show us how powerful Jesus was. There's a passage in Isaiah that is of special significance to this miracle. In Isaiah 35 God is speaking through Isaiah and promising a time when things will be set right and brokenness will be fixed. Look at verses 1 and 2 in Isaiah 35. How will we know when this happens? Look down at verses 5-7.

You can obviously see the deaf and mute man mentioned, but Isaiah is saying that when events like this happen, you know God's restorative kingdom is at hand. In fact, when events like this take place you will know something else is happening as well. Look back at Isaiah 35:3-4. "Behold, your God."

Jesus has said several times in Mark, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” If you are reading this story in Mark 7 rightly in light of Isaiah 35 you see clearly that Jesus is the fulfillment of this expectation that God will come to His people, He will bring salvation and healing, and ultimately this salvation will extend beyond Israel to Gentiles and broken people all over the world. How should we respond to this sort of news? Go back to Mark 7 and let’s read verses 36-37.

We ought to respond with zeal and joy because our brokenness has been dealt a decisive blow. Dealing with the fragile nature of our human bodies and the guilt and shame that comes from sin and weakness is an ongoing struggle for many people, including believers. You can see in Genesis 3 that one of the most immediate and dramatic effects of the fall is shame. Adam and Eve are horrified at their spiritual and physical exposure before a holy God.

But Jesus comes to confront this type of brokenness head on. You can imagine there was a certain amount of shame and difficulty for this deaf man living during the time especially without the ability to hear or speak. Can you imagine the joy of hearing those words, Be Opened and finding that suddenly your lips are expressing what your brain is thinking?

Here’s at least one of the lessons for us. We have to come face to face with our brokenness and then understand that Jesus came to overcome it. This is why He was born and died, to set things right, including your sin and shame. He came to break the barriers down to a full relationship with God and he’s been doing that for thousands of years in millions of lives. But what does it take? It takes a response like the Gentile woman of humility and faith. Recognize the position you are in, broken and on the outside. Accept the narrative of your sin and separation from God, and trust the compassion of Jesus that we see with this deaf man. This is what he came to do.