

WONDERFUL COUNSELOR & SUFFERING SAVIOR

MARK 7:24-37

After another confrontation with the religious leaders of his day, Jesus decides to leave the predominantly Jewish area where he's been spending most of his time, and he goes to a predominantly non-Jewish area where he seems to be trying to lay low for a little bit (7:24). But while he's in the area, a desperate mother with a demon-possessed daughter hears that he's in town, and she immediately goes to find him hoping that he could heal her daughter. The interactions that Jesus has during his time in this region (7:24-8:9) reflects the message found in the preceding passages – just as there are no foods that are to be considered unclean (7:19), there are no people on earth that are to be considered unclean either.

In this first encounter where this Syrophenician woman comes to Jesus, we are once again confronted with one of the common themes found in Mark's account and a characteristic of the kingdom of God – those that would be considered outsiders are welcomed on the inside. To better understand the context of this story, it needs to be understood how inappropriate it was culturally for this woman to approach Jesus like this.

This woman was:

- a Gentile from a region notorious for its opposition to Israel (Tyre)
- a pagan who was most likely involved in the practice of some other religion
- a woman
- a mother with an unclean child in her house

It was completely inappropriate according to cultural standards for this woman to approach a Jew, let alone a Jewish man, and even more so a Jewish rabbi. She desperately disregards what is appropriate and falls at the feet of Jesus with a humble boldness that begs him for help. By embracing this woman from this particular region, Jesus is beginning to act completely out of character from what would have been expected of the Jewish Messiah.

But we might notice that in his embrace of this woman, Jesus responds to her request with what seems to be some sort of derogatory parable with a racist insult. Jesus compares this woman to a dog who hangs around the dinner table begging for scraps.

Jesus said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (7:27)

How would we respond to this kind of comment from Jesus?

Typically, we'd probably find ourselves responding in one of two ways. On the one hand, we might respond with a strong sense of superiority saying something like this, "I'm a good person who works hard and deserves to be treated better than this." On the other hand, we might respond with an insecure sense of inferiority saying something like this, "You're right, I've done a lot of things wrong in life, and I don't expect God to love me or give me anything."

How often do we find ourselves feeling as if we deserve something from God? How often do we find ourselves feeling as if we shouldn't expect anything from God because of certain sin in our lives? Have you ever felt as if you needed to "clean some things up" in your life before God could love you and accept you?

This woman responds in an entirely different and extraordinary way. She doesn't look down on herself or get offended at all. "She's not saying, 'Lord, give me what I deserve on the basis of my goodness.' She's saying, 'Lord, give me what I don't deserve on the basis of your goodness.'"¹

Now it helps us to understand that Jesus actually uses a form of the word *dog* in this parable which alludes more to a small pet around the house. It's still not a compliment, but the crude harshness of the term as an insult toward Gentiles is not there. It was commonly understood during that day that the Jews were considered the children of God and the Gentile outsiders began to be labeled as the dogs. So the dilemma facing this woman is whether or not Jesus has come exclusively for the children or for the dogs as well?

¹ Tim Keller, *King's Cross*, (Redeemer CityNet, 2011), 88-89

The term used by Jesus in this short parable implies that the dogs are indeed part of the household, and remarkably that is the claim being made by the woman in her response. And not only that, she answers back by using the language of the parable correctly. Remarkably, this woman is the first person to speak from within one of Jesus' parables which means that she is the first person recorded in Mark's account who clearly understood what Jesus was saying and teaching – she's the first example of someone having 'ears to hear'.

In this parable, Jesus is teaching that there is an obvious order in which a meal is eaten. The family eats first, and then the house pets get the scraps that are left over after everyone is done. Jesus is emphasizing to this woman that he has come to minister to the Jews first and that the Gentiles get to partake in his message after that (Romans 1:16). The woman gets this, and she accepts her place in the parable. She finds great hope in her place anyway, and she believes that in Jesus there is enough grace to go around for everybody.

The woman from beginning to end of this particular story doesn't for one second get caught up in who she is (an unholy, unworthy Gentile woman) but rather remains completely focused and hopeful in who Jesus is. Jesus commends the woman and grants her desperate request for her daughter. This completely sold out approach of clinging to who Jesus is and not being distracted by who we are leads to the blessing of true saving faith.

Now, immediately following his encounter with this Syrophenician woman, Jesus encounters (and heals) a disabled man who was unable to hear and could hardly talk. Here in this Gentile region, we observe two very different healing miracles. For the woman's daughter, Jesus just declared that she has been healed without even interacting or visiting with the daughter at all. For the man who was deaf and mute, Jesus pulls him aside and performs what seems to be some sort of healing ritual. So, why the difference?

Why does Jesus heal this man in such a 'touchy-feely' way rather than just with a command like he did for the woman?

Although we can only speculate, we can comfortably assume that Jesus, as the Wonderful Counselor, knows and gives us each what we need. He doesn't perform this ritual with the man because he needs to do it, but rather because the man needs him to do it.²

Think about it. Because of his disability, this man has more than likely feared the spotlight of public attention his entire life. Jesus understands this and so he takes the man out of the spotlight and into the comfort of privacy. He then proceeds to touch the man's ears and mouth. In a sense, Jesus is speaking this man's language. This man has never been able to hear or speak. His entire life has been one of nonverbal language, and so Jesus is connecting with this man on a deep personal level that he can understand.

The Syrophenician woman had broken through all the barriers of cultural correctness with a humble boldness that expected Jesus' help because of who he was. But this disabled man had not approached Jesus at all. Instead, he was brought to Jesus by his friends who then proceeded to ask Jesus for his help. The woman only needed affirmation from Jesus, but the man needed affection from him. And that's the beauty in why Jesus healed people in different ways. As the Wonderful Counselor, he gives us each what he knows we really need.

So as we look at this healing of this disabled man, we might ask why Jesus lets out a deep sigh just before he heals him? The original Greek translates this sigh as 'an expression of pain'. So why would Jesus give a deep sigh of pain just before he heals this man rather than some sort of expression of joyful excitement over what he was about to do?

The key to understanding Jesus' emotions here in this healing might be found in 7:32. The Greek word used there to describe the man's condition ('deaf and could hardly talk') is found nowhere else in the Bible except once in Isaiah 35. It's not a common word, and so Mark really has no reason to choose that particular word to describe this man's condition unless he might be alluding to its use back in Isaiah 35 as well. And so to understand why Mark feels the need to include this deep sigh of Jesus, we need to understand why Mark chooses to use language from Isaiah 35.

² Keller, 92

There through the prophet Isaiah we read:

They shall see the glory of the Lord, and majesty of our God... Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. (Isaiah 35)

So why the deep sigh of pain from Jesus just before this miracle?

Because these miracles that Jesus is performing are going to come with a cost. A cost that he was getting ready to pay himself. The glory of the Lord and the majesty of our God mentioned in Isaiah are now powerfully present in the person and work of Jesus. The blind are now seeing, the deaf are now hearing, and the mute are now singing, but Jesus himself will soon be suffering. He has come to serve and to save his people, but the cost of doing so will not be cheap. While offering healing and salvation to the world, Jesus is getting ready to absorb the judgement of God by giving his own life as the payment for the sins of man. The one true Child of God was getting ready to be cast out of the house in order that we may be granted a place at the table.

And so at the end of this story when Jesus commands the crowd to remain silent about this miracle, it somewhat echoes this expression of pain. It's a reminder that experiencing his miracles alone is still an inadequate form of faith. And so to go around sharing the miracles of Jesus without a clear understanding of the coming suffering of Jesus will inevitably lead to confusion about who Jesus really is. This Wonderful Counselor must also be understood and most intimately known as our Suffering Savior.