

SERMON NOTES

Third Sunday after the Assumption
(Eve of the Fast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross)

Synaxis Gospel
Mark 7:31-37

OPEN EARS

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel, the teachers of the Jews were critical of Jesus. These teachers were in charge of teaching the Word of God, but they had developed many other "traditions" which, they argued, the people needed to observe and obey. Some of these "traditions" were in direct conflict with the Word of God inasmuch that the "traditions" nullified God's direct commandments.¹ Now, they criticized Jesus because He and His disciples were not obeying the "traditions" such as the ritual of hand washing.² With regard to this particular ritualistic "tradition," Jesus answered his accusers by pointing out that defilement does not come by what enters the body through the mouth, but what comes out of the heart.³ The evil that man harbors in his heart is the true defiler.⁴

After this teaching, Jesus traveled out of the Jewish lands into what is now Lebanon to be alone in secret with His disciples. This was a land inhabited by Gentiles, non-Jews considered by the Jews to be "unclean." Contacts with them were by "tradition" sources of defilement.⁵ Jesus had a different opinion.

Jesus was famous, even in this Gentile land. The news of His whereabouts leaked out, and a Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, came to Him to plead for the deliverance of her daughter from an evil spirit.⁶ Her faith in Him and her humility of spirit caused Jesus to answer her request even though He had told her that His ministry at that time was only to the Jews. In this instance, the ousting of the demon came not as a result of a verbal command on Jesus' part, but instead from what seems to be a simple act of the will of our Lord. Jesus willed it and the demon had to go. After that event, we see Jesus again returning to the area of the Sea of Galilee.

¹ Mark 7:6-13

² Mark 7:2-5

³ Mark 7: 14-15.

⁴ This point helps give weight to the argument that, in John 6:50-58, Jesus was using metaphors for spiritual concepts. That argument sees holiness as also a matter of the spiritual 'heart', not of the physical digestive system. It understands holiness as the result of faith in Christ and His life-giving death on the Cross.

⁵ Acts 10:28

⁶ Mark 7: 25-30

SYNTAXIS READING

Mark 7:31-37

And again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis.

And they brought to Him one who was deaf and spoke with difficulty, and they entreated Him to lay His hand upon him.

And He took him aside from the multitude by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva;

and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, "Ephphatha!" that is, "Be opened."

And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly.

And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it.

And they were utterly astonished, saying, "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak."

NOTES

And again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis.

Decapolis is Greek for *ten cities*. It was "a confederation of ten Hellenistic cities located primarily on the eastern side of the Jordan River to the southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Since ancient times, there has been some uncertainty as to precisely which cities made up the ten cities of the Decapolis, but the list included the cities of Abila, Gadara, Gerasa, Pella, Philadelphia, and Scythopolis (the only one located west of the Jordan). The gospels mention the region of Decapolis in connection with the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31)."⁷

The region of the Gadarenes is the scene of an earlier miracle performed by Jesus—He cast out a legion of demons from a possessed man.⁸ When Jesus was asked at that time by the fearful locals to please leave, the man was left behind to be a witness to his neighbors of the grace of God. It may be to this region that Jesus has returned and why He is famous there.

⁷ Accordance 4.5, *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, "Decapolis".

⁸ Mark 5:1-20

And they brought to Him one who was deaf, and spoke with difficulty,
“They” are probably people from the area, but possibly “they” are the disciples acting at the behest of the locals. The point is not important; Mark simply states, “They” brought the afflicted man to Jesus;

A speech defect can be caused by an inability to hear or a physical problem with the tongue.

and they entreated Him to lay His hand upon him.

Jesus had healed many people by laying His hands upon them⁹ and this is another way of requesting that Jesus heal this man. Jesus, of course, need only *will* something and it would be done. Metaphors for power are *hand* and *arm* so this expression “lay your hand upon” could simply mean, “use your power for.”

“They” are probably the crowd, and from Jesus’ reaction, it is possible that they just want to see Jesus perform a miracle.

And He took him aside from the multitude by himself, and put His fingers into his ears,

This was not to be a public healing spectacle for the benefit of the crowd.

The man could not hear and possibly this was Jesus’ indication to the man that He would heal the man’s hearing. Jesus did not need this and the following physical action to cure; therefore the actions might have been for the benefit of the man’s faith.

and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva;

This gesture, too, might have been for the man’s understanding of what is about to be done.

and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh

Sometimes *heaven* is substituted for *God*¹⁰ so that this gesture indicates Jesus’ dependence upon His Father. The indwelling Father is the source of the incarnate God’s power. Jesus only worked the works of His Father.¹¹

This word, in the Greek (στυάζω), means to “groan” or “moan.” Why would Jesus do this? Some have suggested that it was a groan of sympathy for the man’s condition. However, He healed many times without groaning. Others suggest that it was a groan caused by the intense battle Jesus was fighting against the evil spirits.

We know that the demons recognize Who Jesus really is and instantly obey Him. There is no struggle against Him. Earlier, Jesus had simply willed a demon to leave the Syrophenician woman’s daughter.¹²

I would like to suggest that it was a deep pain to His spirit to witness the lack of faith among his own Jewish people, in contrast to the great faith of the Gentile, Syrophenician woman. The word translated “sighed” or “moaned” is only used twice in the Gospels, both in Mark. The second use is in Mark 8:12 (a heightened form – “sighed deeply”). In that episode, those who are the teachers of the Jews, the Pharisees, do not believe in Jesus and ask for a sign, (miracle attesting His authenticity). This lack of faith may have caused Jesus to moan in His spirit.

⁹ Mark 6:5; Luke 4:40, etc.

¹⁰ For instance, ‘the kingdom of heaven’ is substituted for ‘the kingdom of God.’

¹¹ John 14:10

¹² Mark 7:29-30

He said to him, “Ephphatha!” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened,

“Ephphatha” is an Aramaic word which Mark translated here for his readers. The command applied to both handicaps. The hearing and speaking abilities both needed to be freed—the way opened for them to function normally.

and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly.

The “impediment of his tongue” seems to indicate a physical problem of the tongue. This phrase may remove the possibility that the problem was the result of an inability to hear.

And He ordered them not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it.

When Jesus, the Creator, commanded the wind and the sea, “Peace, be still,” the elements obeyed.¹³ When Jesus, the Lord of All, commanded the evil spirits to leave a person, they obeyed.¹⁴ They obeyed because His Deity was recognized by them and they submitted. But when our Lord commanded these people, they did not obey!

And they were utterly astonished, saying, “He has done all things well;

Their statement is an allusion to “And God saw **every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.**”¹⁵ Just like the Creator had done, the wonders that Jesus performed were “very good” indeed.

He makes even the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.”

These are the same signs that the prophet Isaiah said would be performed at the great time of salvation, when God Himself would visit His people.¹⁶

Yet, the people do not recognize the Mighty God in their midst. They do *not* obey.

APPLICATION

Through the word of His prophets, God had foretold the day of His coming. But though they knew the prophecies, when God appeared to do His mighty work of salvation, the Jews did not recognize Him. They were like the deaf man of our reading, they could not hear nor could they understand. Their spiritual ears were completely deaf. Why? They were deaf because they were not tuned in to His voice.

As the people of God, the Jews had been given every blessing: the prophets, the Scriptures, God’s promises. But now they couldn’t even hear Him because they had long since stopped listening intently to His Word. They concentrated on their “traditions” as the Pharisees taught them to do; but God Himself, was not in the center of their life. The traditions had become the important thing.

¹³ Mark 4:37-41

¹⁴ Mark 5:1-13

¹⁵ The Greek LXX of Gen. 1:31 and the Greek here in the people’s astonished statement are almost exactly the same.

¹⁶ Isaiah 35:4-6, cf., Isaiah 42

Jesus knew the sorry state of their once vibrant religion. The great prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years earlier, had seen it coming. Jesus rebuked those who had led God's once faithful people down this path of pride in themselves and indifference to the heart of God revealed in His Word. Quoting Isaiah Jesus cried out to them:

“Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

*THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME,
BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.¹⁷*

Neglecting the commandments of God, you hold to the traditions of men.”

The people had thus stopped their own ears and could no longer spiritually hear and understand the voice of God.

The people were amazed that Jesus could do such wonders, but it had all been foretold. They saw it but they didn't understand. They didn't understand that God had appeared in their midst just as He had promised. Their confidence that what God promises He will surely do had long since disappeared.

Today, when Jesus looks at each one of us what does he see? Will he be grieved at our unbelief, or our lack of understanding of Who He really is? Do we not understand that Our Lord *is* the Almighty God that all Creation *must* obey? The wildest winds and raging seas instantly obey Him. The evil demons cower before Him and submit to His commands. Only in mankind do we see creatures that dare ignore Him--creatures who do not recognize Him when He appears in their midst, whose ears are deaf to His voice, who do not obey Him!

Are we like that? Like the people of our reading, do we place more value on our traditions than on the Word of our God? Or, are we demanding more signs before we will recognize and trust Him?

Our God loved us and went to the Cross for our sakes to clear us of our sins. He still loves us. His Resurrection is the only sign any of us need. Even so, do we ignore Him and stop our ears from hearing His voice? May it never be! May our ears be open, may our spirits be tuned in to every word that comes from the mouth of God. May we truly understand Who He is and give Him all our love, devotion and obedience. May our tongues be freed to proclaim how wonderful He is; how gracious, how loving and kind to those who love Him. Then we will be truly the people of God and all the world will be changed because of it. For He still does all things well.

¹⁷ Matthew 15:8-9