

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

MARK: PURITY AND DEFILEMENT II

MARK 7:24-37

DAVE WAGNER

Last time we looked at a text concerned with the issue of ritual purity, perhaps the one issue above all others which functioned as a wall of separation between Jew and Gentile; following hard on that text is the healing of two Gentiles, both in Gentile regions. We'll look at these two healings today and we need to realize that after Jesus' comments about the dietary law and uncleanness, it seems obvious Mark wants to show us that Jesus intended to apply the principle not only to foods but to people as well. While in redemptive history there is a national priority (salvation comes first to the Jews), God has not left the Gentiles out of his plan; quite the contrary. Here we find Jesus granting redemptive blessing to two such Gentiles. Orthodox Jews would have considered Gentiles unclean and avoided them on that basis. Jesus, on the other hand, is willing to deal with them and even help them.

Additionally, as we consider reasons for Jesus' circuit through Gentile areas in the following stories, it is possible Jesus intended to remove himself from the controversy and potential danger which his recent interactions with the Pharisees have created.

TEXT

Our text begins with Jesus leaving the area of his teaching on purity and defilement and heading northwest to the Gentile region of Tyre. It appears from v24 that Jesus has retired here for rest and solitude; he wants to go unnoticed but fails when a Gentile woman hears of his presence and comes to make request of him. This woman's daughter is demonized so the woman falls at Jesus' feet and persistently begs him to help her daughter.

Now to appreciate the character of this situation, and woman, we have to realize how off-limits this woman would be for an orthodox Jew. Consider the following quotes:

"Few of those who approached Jesus had so much against them, from an orthodox Jewish point of view. She was, first of all, a woman, and therefore one with whom a respectable Jewish teacher should not associate. She was a Gentile, as the double **designation...emphasizes. And her daughter's condition** might be expected to inspire fear and/or disgust, while the uncleanness of the demon suggests ritual impurity. That Jesus ultimately responded to a request from such a suppliant, and even that he was prepared to engage her in serious dialogue, is typical of his unconcern for convention when it stood in the way of his mission."

"That such a woman chose to approach a Jewish healer, and even fell at his feet, indicates either desperation or a remarkable insight into the wider significance of Jesus' ministry...**The subsequent dialogue suggests at least an element of the latter.**"

"Even Levi the tax-collector must have raised his eyebrows at this woman who has the pluck to beg 'Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.' Despite her notorious credentials, she does not apologize or cower in obsequiousness. This woman can claim none of the credits that a good Jew might bring to the Prophet of Nazareth. Her only cover letter is her desperate need. Her prospects are as bleak as those of another Syrophoenician centuries earlier whose life ran out with the next meal - **until she met a man of God...She illustrates in the most unmistakable way** the truth of the previous encounter with the Pharisees that if foods are not unclean, then neither are people!"

It might be difficult to find a better specimen of uncleanness than this woman; if Jesus should avoid anyone on grounds of ritual cleanness it would be her, but his response to her is more complicated than simple avoidance, and indeed, far more wonderful.

Jesus answers the woman in v27, not with the warm and friendly offer of help we would expect, and in fact, far from it. Jesus' response is actually fairly insulting on the surface:

"The whole tone of the sentence is negative to the point of offensiveness, and suggests that Jesus has no intention of helping the woman. The use of kunaria (little dogs) seems to add gratuitously to the offense, since dogs were regarded by the Jews, and probably equally by their Semitic neighbors, as unclean animals. **Biblical references to dogs...are always hostile. To refer to a human being as a dog is deliberately offensive or dismissive...Jews typically referred to Gentiles as dogs...It is the sort of language a Gentile might expect from a Jew, but to find it in a saying of Jesus is shocking.**"

However, despite this offensive response, there are some clues that there is more to Jesus' response than meets the eye. First, there is the fact that Jesus speaks with her at all, perhaps an unlikely response for an orthodox Jew. Second, the word for "dogs" is actually used in the diminutive, and seems to speak not of outside dogs or stray dogs but of the smaller pet dogs that were sometimes allowed in the house. Third, notice that Jesus' response is not that the dogs never get fed, but that children should be fed first; this fits the biblical pattern of salvation history in which salvation comes first to the Jews and afterward to the Gentiles. Fourth, and most importantly, as we'll see in a moment, that Jesus grants the woman's request is indicative that his seemingly gruff response is hiding more below the surface which is not immediately obvious. In fact, in Matthew's account, Jesus is even more exuberant in granting the woman's request, praising her for her great faith. Also, one writer notes how different Jesus' response might be depending on a his facial expression and tone, to which we do not have access.

The first surprise in this story comes with the woman's response, full of humility and wit. It is true the children get the bread first, says she; but it is also true that the

little dogs, among which Jesus has classed her, get to eat the crumbs as they fall from the children!

"It is a remarkable twist to the argument, and one which displays as much humility on the woman's part as it does shrewdness. She does not dispute the lower place which Jesus' saying assumes for Gentiles, and even accepts without protest the **offensive epithet 'dog', but insists that the dogs, too, must have their day...**the mission of the Messiah of Israel, while it must of course begin with Israel, cannot be confined there. The Gentiles may have to wait, but they are not excluded from the benefits which the Messiah brings. On this basis, she is bold enough to pursue her request; even the crumbs will be enough."

Jesus had refused her on grounds of the proper order of salvation history: first Jew then Gentile; she grants the principle, even allowing the lowly place it assigns to her, but insists that having a lowly place does not prohibit her from redemptive blessing, and perhaps implying concurrent blessing, which need not wait until the Jews have had their fill.

Jesus is pleased with her response and grants her request; the demon has left her daughter even before she returns home. As mentioned above, Jesus' granting of this miracle indicates his purpose in the conversation all along was more than would first appear by his initial gruff response. Consider the following quote:

"He appears like the wise teacher who allows, and indeed incites, his pupil to mount a victorious argument against the foil of his own reluctance. He functions as what in a different context might be called devil's advocate, and is not disappointed to be defeated in argument."

Jesus now leaves Tyre, goes north through Sidon and then returns southeast all the way to Decapolis, southeast of Lake Galilee. Decapolis, like Tyre, is another Gentile region.

While in this region the people bring Jesus a man who is deaf and who speaks with great difficulty, and they ask Jesus to lay his hand on him, likely for healing. The word for "one who speaks with difficulty", *mogilalos*, tips us off to a thematic connection Mark seems to be making with the book of Isaiah:

"*Mogilalos* is not used elsewhere in the NT, and in the LXX (the Septuagint; this is a Greek translation of the OT, completed roughly 200 years before Christ) occurs only in Is. 35.6; in view of the likely influence of that passage of Isaiah in v37, it is probable that Mark's use of it here is also a deliberate allusion."

"The allusion to Isaiah 35 is of supreme significance for Mark's presentation of Jesus, not only because the restoration of speech to a *mogilalos* (person who speaks with difficulty) signals the eschatological arrival of the Day of the Lord but also because the desert wastelands of Lebanon (Is. 35.2) will receive the joy of God. The regions of Tyre and Sidon are, of course, precisely the Lebanon of Isaiah 35."

So what we have here is Mark linking Jesus up with the Isaiah 35 passage where, in the end, God grants great blessing to the land including supernatural healing for those with impediments and disabilities. Jesus is the beginning of the fulfillment of the eschatological hopes of Isaiah's prophecies.

In v33 Jesus takes the man away from the crowd and performs the healing by touching his ears, putting his own saliva on the man's tongue, looking up to heaven with a sigh and speaking the Aramaic word "Ephphatha," which is a command to open up.

As Jesus' healings go, this is a far more involved procedure than is normal. One writer suggests Jesus is accommodating himself to the semi-magical ideas of the Gentiles, and this is interesting but not very persuasive since usually Jesus simply heals with a touch or a word; why accommodate these people when Jesus almost never seems to do it elsewhere? Addressing the use of saliva, note the following quote:

"This would not have been as surprising in the ancient Mediterranean world as it is to us; there are several ancient accounts of the use of saliva especially in curing blindness...**The famous story told by Tacitus...of how a blind man in Alexandria was cured by the saliva of the emperor Vespasian...implies that it was not the saliva** as such, but specifically the emperor's saliva, which was effective. Similarly here it is Jesus' saliva which cures; it is effective not in itself as a medical agent, but, like the touch of the hand, as it identifies with the powerful person of the healer."

Jesus' sigh probably indicates great feeling, perhaps over the man's helpless and pitiable condition. Mark's recording of the Aramaic word may come from an eyewitness reminiscence which Mark is using for this story, perhaps Peter.

"The incident...is notable not only for its non-Jewish location, but also for the use of saliva for healing...for the recording of Jesus' Aramaic word of healing...and for the addition of a further complaint (deaf and dumb) to the list of those he has already healed. In the light of the vision of Is. 35.5-6, 'Then the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped...and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy', such a healing is loaded with eschatological significance."

The cure works and the man is healed, at which point Jesus gives his characteristic command for silence, and the people characteristically ignore the command and spread abroad news of the healing. The people's praise of Jesus in the end of v37 again links this story up with Isaiah 35 where the coming age is said to include such wonders as the deaf hearing and the mute speaking.

THEOLOGY

1. The first piece of theology for us to consider concerns again the issue of purity and defilement, but this time in terms of different races of people. The orthodox Jews of Jesus' time believed Gentiles were unclean, and they had reason to think so from the OT. However, in the coming of Christ those peoples (Gentiles) who formerly were unclean through exclusion from Moses' law are cleansed so as to

become legitimate subjects for evangelization. This is a lesson Peter had to learn in Acts 10.

Now despite this Jesus' mission was specifically to Jews, as he himself says on different occasions. In our text we see it is not as though God has no intention to save Gentiles, but simply that Israel enjoys the salvation-historical priority in receiving the blessings of witness and ministry first; the Gentiles come after. Many Jews, on the other hand, failed to grasp God's ultimate plan for the Gentiles and were effectively religious racists. Whereas Jesus intended the mission to go to Gentiles after Jews many Jews didn't intend a mission to go to Gentiles at all. Their views of the uncleanness of Gentiles made such a mission impossible, after all, which is undoubtedly the reason Peter required a vision to break his habit of avoiding Gentiles in evangelization.

So here is the principle: Since the coming of Christ and especially after his death and resurrection, the Gospel of the Kingdom is for every race of people indiscriminately; there is no longer a clean/unclean distinction which runs along racial or national lines. The new distinction is between followers of Christ and non-followers of Christ; here runs the new clean/unclean distinction line.

Now one important implication of this principle for us is that in our evangelistic efforts we should never withhold the Gospel from any person based on their race or nationality, nor should we refuse to accept persons into our fellowship based on these factors. So, when a person expresses their desire to belong to an all-black church, free from non-blacks, they violate this principle. Or, if a church insists on maintaining total whiteness, refusing non-whites into fellowship, they also are in violation of the principle. Of course there are ministries which specifically target certain people groups, such as a church which conducts meetings in Mandarin Chinese to reach the Chinese population of some American city; this is an excellent work so long as it does not refuse to admit members based solely on the fact that they are not Chinese. Christ's mission encompasses every people group and our

churches and ministries must be open to reflecting this principle by not putting up racial or national barriers to church membership.

And we might take this principle another direction: I suggest it is wrong for a church to gear its entire ministry to people in their 20's; this is the kind of church where an elderly person feels out of place *by design*. Or, take a church which gears its entire ministry to people in their 70's; this is the kind of place where a person in their 20's feels out of place, again, by design. Rather, churches should be open to reflecting various elements from different generations in the way they conduct service or other meetings, so long as God and his word are kept central, and everything is done decently and in order, with clarity and wisdom. Does this mean a church cannot have a weekly meeting specially designed for 20 year olds, or 70 year olds, or men, or women, or high schoolers or some other subgroup of members? Certainly not; such meetings are perfectly legitimate so long as they remain one aspect of the church's ministry and not the entirety of the church's ministry, and so long as they are conducted with truth and holiness. Jesus brings a salvation which is as big as the world, where every kind of person is welcome to come and take their place; the church should respond by, as much as possible, making room for every kind of person.

2. Our second theological issue concerns the praiseworthy response of the Gentile woman, which is a marvelous example of saving faith. Her faith in Jesus expresses itself in humble persistence which is convinced that Jesus can solve her problem and which will not take "no" for an answer. Additionally, it is possible that in this woman we witness a surprising insight which we would have to say can only come from God's work in her. That her faith is humble is obvious from her willingness to accept the appellation "dog". As mentioned above, if possible, this comment from Jesus would probably be even more offensive in his context than in ours. The woman, however, will not be deterred and is willing to accept a lowly place, and even turn it to her advantage in the idea of dogs eating under the table. Of course humility, which is having a modest or lowly view of oneself, based on Scripture, is

nothing other than having a true view of oneself; as creatures and much more as sinners we have much to be humble about. And humility is connected to saving faith for the obvious reason that unless one has such a view of himself he will never trust in Someone else to rescue him from destruction. For this reason Jesus tells his disciples that unless they are converted and become as little children (in terms of humility) they will never enter the kingdom. So humility is an essential element of saving faith, and should be common fare in the Christian life. Further, persistence is a quality of saving faith not only exemplified in Scripture but even commanded, such as in Jesus' story about the widow and the unjust judge. If a person is not willing to keep asking, keep knocking, keep seeking, quite simply, they cannot be saved. The faith which gives up after a first and even second try, indeed, the faith which gives up at all is not a saving faith, but only a temporary, wavering faith, only sufficient to damn a soul, not save it. There is a certain reticence, a certain modesty, a sort of unwillingness to be seen as desperate which prevents men from dealing with God importunately. I suggest this is often nothing other than pride, the opposite of humility, which effectively short-circuits not only humility but also persistence in faith. If it is a sort of delicacy or unwillingness to make a scene, or an unwillingness to make a nuisance of oneself, we can only say the man in question knows little of either heaven or hell, since such realities drive a man on and dissolve his reticence and delicacy with a noticeable intensity. The man who believes his one shot to escape the Flame and Darkness is his plea to the Judge will plead with ferocity and violence, unless perhaps he be drunk or asleep. Anyone who receives true insight into Christ and the realities which surround him will learn not only to ask God once for things, demurely and primly, but to wail and weep and beg in his supplications like a man on the precipice of hell. So much for persistence as an essential element of faith. Lastly, it is just possible, though not certain, that this Gentile woman in the story exhibits a surprising insight into the progress of the kingdom of God as concerns blessing for the Gentiles. If so, this would also reveal insight as an essential element into saving faith. Perhaps no greater example of this

can be found than that in the next chapter when Peter confesses Jesus to be Christ, unless maybe the similar confession of the centurion at the end of this Gospel. In order for faith to be true and saving Christian faith it must include an element of divinely granted insight into the mysteries of Christ and the kingdom. That a lowly, Gentile woman should be able to respond to Jesus in such a way as to "overcome" his "reluctance" suggests she may have been granted just such an insight, in this case pertaining to God's ultimate purpose to grant redemptive blessing to the Gentiles. If men are to believe savingly in Jesus, they must be granted sight of Jesus and the kingdom, as Nicodemus was told. In a sense, this is directly antithetical to the typical definition of faith held by the world, whereby someone refuses all the obvious evidence and tries to believe something plainly false. On the contrary, unless God grants men this supernatural insight into the person and work of Jesus, that is, unless God lets men see, with their own eyes as it were, who Jesus is, men never do and never can believe. Faith then, in part, is based on a kind of sight, albeit a supernatural sight apart from the physical senses, and is actually far off from the definition common to the world. In this sense at least, seeing really is believing. For us this must serve to increase our gratitude to God for freely giving us such a sight, leading to saving faith, or else to caution those who think they have faith and yet lack this spiritual insight into Jesus and the kingdom. And it increases our confidence to preach only the pure Word since no gimmick of ours could ever open the eyes of the unbeliever, but only the work of God to grant such supernatural insight.

3. Third and last, based on the link between this story and Isaiah 35, this story advances the idea that in his coming Jesus has begun the Age to Come. The OT prophets predicted an end to the present evil age in which God would enter the scene and remake the world, eliminating all sin and evil in the process and blessing his people with glory and redemption. That this coming age would arrive in stages rather than all at once is apparently something not even the OT prophets knew, and certainly the Jews of Jesus' time, including the disciples, did not know. Even so,

the prophesied Age to Come has begun its coming in Jesus. We see specific fulfillment of this prophecy in the restoration of a deaf-mute, just as was promised in Isaiah 35. More broadly we can say that the fulfillment of the Age to Come, when Christ comes a second time, will entail the total removal of physical injury, illness and disability, these things being symptoms of the Fall and not part of God's original Creation. The restoration of the deaf-mute is like a flower which blooms sometime before spring, a first hint that the snow will melt, winter will come to an end, and eventually the whole world will be in bloom. This imagery is actually much to the point as the rest of Isaiah 35 shows, where we see a barren Desert turn into a blooming, lush, well-watered Garden. This imagery points to the ultimate restoration of the entire Cosmos once the Age to Come has fully come. Christians should see themselves as living in the strange period of the overlap, where the new age has begun before the old age has fully ended; accordingly we experience the often confusing tension between the glorious future age and the present, evil one, not least in our divided psyche which possesses the new love for God while yet struggling against the old love for sin. God's renewal of the world, which began with the coming of Jesus, first converts and gathers in God's people before turning to the renewal of the world, and so we live in the awkward in-between, awaiting the consummation of our hope in Christ.