

The Distasteful Means God Uses To Sanctify Us

Mark 7:31-37

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Dear ones, we must never forget that the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is the one and only object of our faith. Only the living God can justify us, sanctify us, and glorify us. Thus, strictly speaking, it is not even our faith or the size of our faith that saves us. It is the object of our faith that saves us. It is Christ alone that can save such undeserving sinners as you and me. Faith is the gift of God whereby we simply receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation as He is offered to us in the gospel.

Furthermore, we must be ever so careful that we do not trust in our prayers, in our good works, in our baptism, or in the Confession of Faith to sanctify us. Again it is only the living God who can conform us to His image. Yes, He uses means to accomplish this. Yes, in His good providence He has given us faithful Church courts and a faithful Confession of Faith as aids to help us in our faith and understanding of God's Word. But these are not the object of our faith, but rather aids and helps to our faith (as they are agreeable to the Word of God). Listen to the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith in this regard (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31:4):

All synods or councils since the apostle's times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both [i.e. in both faith and practice—GLP].

Let us, therefore, rejoice in the means of grace and in the aids to our faith that the Lord has given to us (as our Confession of Faith, Catechisms, and sacred Covenants), but let us not place our faith in these means or in these aids, lest we become idolaters.

This Lord's Day we shall see how the Lord used most unusual means to heal one who was deaf and mute, and I submit to you that He did so in order to demonstrate this truth: Our faith must not rest in the means God uses to save us, sanctify us, or heal us, but rather Christ alone must be our trust, our confidence, and our hope now and forevermore. The main points from our text are the following: (1) The Need Of This Man (Mark 7:31-32a); (2) The Unusual Means Used By Christ (Mark 7:32b-35); (3) The Effect Upon The Witnesses (Mark 7:36-37).

I. The Need Of This Man (Mark 7:31-32a).

A. After setting forth the persevering faith of the Syrophenician woman as an example for us all to follow (in Mark 7:24-30), the Lord leaves the area of Tyre and Sidon and returns again to the area of Decapolis on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. This would be the same general area where the Lord had previously delivered the demoniac who lived among the tombs (Mark 5:1-20). As the Lord returns, He is met by a great multitude of people, many among whom were very ill (according to Matthew 15:30). Now out of all the sick, whom the Lord healed on that occasion, one healing in particular is separated from all of the rest and recorded by Mark. It is the healing of the man we find here in Mark 7:31-37. There must have been something in particular about this healing that set it apart from the rest in the mind of the Holy Spirit. What made this healing so unique from all of the others on that occasion? Let us see.

B. There is brought to Christ a certain man who could neither hear nor speak (at least with no clear articulation of speech). Perhaps this man was able to communicate by writing. But if that were not the case, he was isolated from the world of communication to a very great extent due to his disabilities.

1. First of all, the Scripture states that the man was deaf. He could not hear the voices of his wife or children if he was married. He could not hear the rain fall against the house as he fell asleep at night, nor the chirping voices of the birds in the trees. He could not hear the Word of God read or preached. He could not sing the psalms with God's people. Twenty-four hours each day there was only silence— complete and total silence. Since sign language at that period of history was limited to very rudimentary gestures, meaningful communication with the outside world was almost non-existent. How he became deaf we are not told, but it was most likely the result of a disease or injury he sustained later in life, than the result of some birth defect.

2. For Mark notes that he had a second disability: an impediment in his speech. That phrase in our text which describes this man's second disability is actually a compound word in the Greek text (i.e. two words joined together as one word). The two Greek words joined together mean "difficulty" and "speak". Thus, this man was apparently able to articulate some words or some sounds, but only with great difficulty due to some problem with his tongue or with that part of the brain that controls speech. The fact that he articulated some words or sounds with great difficulty would indicate that he was likely not born deaf, but had become deaf later in life. However, it should be noted that his inability to communicate by speech was apparently so significant that he was still classified in the same category as a mute who could not speak (according to Mark 7:37).

3. Can you imagine the temptation to frustration, anxiety, and anger that would likely confront one who had at one time been able to hear and to speak clearly and now was unable to do either? One who for the most part was now cut off from meaningful communication with those whom he loved and from the corporate worship of God in the synagogue? Dear ones, have you recently praised the Lord for His mercy

in graciously granting to you the gift of hearing and speaking? Do you realize what your world would be like without these gifts? Neither you nor I deserve such wondrous gifts. There are many in the world who God has not blessed with these gifts for His own holy purposes. Remember the word of the Lord to Moses in Exodus 4:11. And why has the Lord made people deaf and mute? For His own holy and wise purposes (as with the man who was born blind in John 9). Dear ones, how do the deaf and the mute (at the present time) receive the gospel of Christ if they cannot hear and if they cannot speak? A disability is not just something to pity, but it is always an opportunity to serve. Would the Lord call any of you children or young people to serve Him by learning the amazing language of Sign Language? Let us never forget that all disabilities, illnesses, and diseases are God's opportunities placed in our path to love, help, and serve others in the name of Christ. How are you helping others who are ill (and or disabled) in the church? Often we may complain to the Lord, "What am I suppose to be doing in the church? What is my niche and place of service in the Church?" Dear ones, wherever there is a disability, an illness, or a disease, there is God's appointed opportunity for you to serve. Are you using these opportunities or are you missing these opportunities because you are looking for some great public ministry? When you serve even the least of Christ's brothers or sisters, Jesus said you serve Him (Matthew 25:40). Even a cup of cold water offered to one because he/she is a disciple of Christ will be rewarded (Matthew 10:42).

II. The Unusual Means Used By Christ (Mark 7:32b-35).

A. When this needy man is presented to the Lord to be healed (perhaps by his family or friends), the text states, "and they beseech him to put his hands upon him" (Mark 7:32b). I find this interesting in light of what the Lord actually does in the next verse. They want Christ to put His

hands upon the man that he might be healed. But this the Lord does not do—that is He does not lay His hands upon him. Does this not suggest that these family members or friends associated Christ’s power to heal with the laying on of hands? It may be that they were more looking to the outward means for this man’s healing than to Christ Himself. This seems to have been the superstitious view that Simon the sorcerer had in Acts 8:18-19 as well.

1. Dear ones, realize that there was nothing wrong with the laying on of hands in either the ministry of Jesus or in the ministry of the apostles (many times we find mention of the laying on of hands upon those who were healed). In fact, that would seem to have been the ordinary means by which the afflicted were healed (as in Luke 4:40 and many other places). However, when the power of the Lord became so identified with that means and limited to that means, rather than the Lord Himself being the source of that power, the laying on of hands became superstitious.

2. And just about any approved means for our growth in Christ can become a superstitious idol if we forget who is the one and only object of our faith, of our prayers, of our regulated worship, of our Catechism, Confession, and Covenants, of our love, of our hope, of our obedience, of our knowledge, of our life. Sometimes we are deaf to the voice of Christ because it does not come through the means which we approve: as when the voice of Christ comes through our wives, or through our husbands, or through our children, or through our parents, or through a brother or sister in the Church, or through the pastor or an elder, or through an affliction or trial. We would rather have the voice of Christ come through a means of which we approve, and at the time and place that we choose. Dear ones, let us not be so bold as to dictate to God by what means we will receive His grace. Make something the object of your faith (other than Christ) and you have idolatry (even if it be an

appointed means of grace such as the Word, the sacraments, or prayer).

3. Now that is not to say that those outward means that God has appointed are unimportant in our worship of God (as if all that is important is that we sincerely trust the Lord and love the Lord). No! For, dear ones, to worship God according to our own inventions is what God calls “will-worship”, which is a form of idolatry as well (Colossians 2:23). We are to worship the Lord only by the means approved by Him in His Word, but we are also to worship HIM and not the means He has approved.

B. Look with me at the unusual means the Lord here employs in order to teach us to look in faith to Christ and not in faith to the means He appoints.

1. First, the Lord takes this needy man away from the crowd (and perhaps his family and friends as well, Mark 7:33). Why? That the eye of faith might be focused upon Christ alone without the distraction and excitement of the multitudes. It is Christ in all His power, in all His mercy, in all His Deity in whom one is to believe. It is not those who have already been healed to whom this man is to look in faith, but to Christ alone. Sometimes the Lord moves us out of the multitude, or out of a relationship with certain loved ones for that very purpose—to commune with Him, to trust Him, and to see Him as all that we truly need in this life and for all eternity.

2. Next, the Lord uses means to heal this man, but means that perhaps astonished them (as much as they do us). Jesus puts His fingers into each of the man’s ears. Now as if that was not unusual enough, the Lord spits either directly upon the man’s tongue or upon indirectly upon His finger and touches the tongue of the man (in either case the Lord can be said to have spit upon the man’s tongue). Now we would no doubt consider these actions on the part of the Lord to be quite

unusual, but consider that the Lord also directly spat into the eye of a blind man on another occasion (not too long afterwards in Mark 8:23).

3. Why did the Lord do this? I stated earlier that it seems that Christ was taking the faith of the man off of the means (ordinarily employed—the laying on of hands) and turning the man’s faith to Himself alone. But still we ask, why these means? Could the Lord not have chosen a more sanitary or fit means to our delicate sensibilities? Of course He could have done so. That’s the very lesson He intended to teach—that He is able to use whatever means He ordains to bring healing, blessing, or sanctification in our lives. He is even able to use what appears to be the most foolish means or the most distasteful means (if you will) to bring us to Christ, to heal us of our spiritual infirmities, and to grow us in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

a. Dear ones, spitting in the Scripture was a sign of shame and contempt (Numbers 12:14; Deuteronomy 25:9). But it is often through means and circumstances in our lives that we find shameful and distasteful (circumstances that we would never choose to go through ourselves) through which the Lord heals us of our many besetting sins and causes us to hear His voice and to sing His praise.

b. Dear ones, think of the shameful and contemptible spitting the Lord of glory endured not for His own sin, but for sinners like you and me (Matthew 26:67—during the unjust trial before Caiaphas; Matthew 27:30—after the unjust trial before Pilate). Christ was treated as someone cursed and contemptible because of our curse and contempt. Dear ones, we can endure the spitting of others for the Cause of Jesus Christ when we consider what He suffered for us, His bride. For the spitting of others upon us is the very means which the Lord has chosen to conform us to the image of Christ. The Lord is infinitely more concerned for your character than for your comfort. And so we must endure the spitting and contempt of adversaries, because we know the Lord loves us

and is using it to make us more and more like our Savior.

4. Looking back to our text now, the Lord looks up to heaven where our faith is firmly fixed (that is in the eternal God), and He sighs as our Great High Priest who sympathizes with our infirmities (Hebrews 4:14-16). The Lord then says unto the deaf man with the speech impediment, “Be opened.” And immediately he hears and speaks plainly. He is healed—not for the sake of the means Christ employed, but for the sake of Christ Himself, who is deserving of all glory and honor.

III. The Effect Upon The Witnesses (Mark 7:36-37).

A. The Lord charges the one healed and his loved ones not to tell any man (at least for the present time). This was no doubt due to the hostility of the Pharisees and Saducees toward Christ—a hostility which would pursue Him eventually to His death.

B. “He hath done all things well” (Mk. 7:37). This is reminiscent of Genesis 1:31 (“And God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was very good”). Dear ones, we are deaf to the voice of God and unable to sing the praises of God before we are recreated in Christ. This man’s story is our story without Christ. The Lord has come to make us to hear Him and to give us a voice to sing His praises and to proclaim His truth (Isaiah 35:4-6). With ears to hear what Christ says unto us and with voices to proclaim His truth and to sing His praises, let us not act as though we have no voice. You are witnesses—go therefore and bear witness to Christ and His Cause. Let us not presume to tell God how and under what circumstances we will be healed or we will be blessed or we will be sanctified and bear fruit. He may take us through very unusual circumstances in order that our faith may be placed in Him and in Him alone, rather than in people or in circumstances with which we are most

comfortable. The Lord may even take us through circumstances that we find to be contemptible, distasteful, and despised in order that we might look all the more to Him. Where are you looking in faith? To Christ or to the means that is most acceptable and comfortable to you (Isaiah 40:28-31)?

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