



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Unlikely Candidates for Acceptance

Mark 7.24-37

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Are There Limits to Our Acceptance?

A cartoon depicts a young man bursting with pride as he stands in front of a chalkboard on which is written the following: “ $2 + 2 = \text{Jesus}$; $8 - 4 = \text{Jesus}$; $12 \div 2 = \text{Jesus}$; $E = \text{MCJesus}$.” The caption reads, “In Bible class we learned that Jesus is the answer.”¹

I thought of that as I considered the questions I’ll ask as we begin.

Think hard about this: Is there anyone (individual or group) whom you believe in your heart of hearts is not a legitimate candidate to receive the gospel? Anyone you would find it hard, if not impossible, to accept into the church without reservation or distinction? Anyone whose acceptance in your congregation would lead you to go elsewhere?

Those questions are complicated by our knowledge of what the New Testament teaches and what the first believers did. We know what the answer are *supposed* to be. That makes self-examination harder and sets us up to be surprised if we find ourselves realizing that the reason we are resisting the entrance of some person or group into the body is that we don’t think they are the right kind of people, all the things we say to obscure our restrictive attitude notwithstanding.²

Our text, Mark 7.24-37, plays out against the backdrop of such attitudes, in Jesus’ ministry and later.

1. Some Pharisees and scribes came to check out Jesus and were alarmed that his disciples did “not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands” (7.1-2, 5).³ This was a problem because of the way “the Pharisees and all the Jews” practiced their ceremonial washings to purify themselves from marketplace contamination (7.3-4). Gentiles would have been at the head of the list of defiled (common) people.
2. The theme recurs throughout Mark 7: defiled (κοινός, *koinos* [2, 5] and κοινῶ, *koinōō* [15, 18, 20, 23]); clean (καθαρίζω, *katharizō* [19]; and unclean (ἀκάθαρτος, *akathartos* [25]).
3. As one of Paul’s co-workers until the end of the apostle’s life (2 Tim 4.11), Mark would have been aware of the ongoing controversy over whether Gentiles were to be accepted without reservation or distinction (see κοινός in Acts 10.14, 28; 11.8; Rom 14.14; καθαρίζω in Acts 10.15; 11.9; 15.9; and ἀκάθαρτος in Acts 10.14, 28; 11.8).⁴

The question of who should be accepted challenged the early church. Had Jesus said or shown something about the matter? Mark 7 answers affirmatively and shows what matters for following Jesus.

Showing the Way to Accepting Gentiles

Both episodes in Mark 7.24-37 find Jesus outside Galilee in Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis, predominantly Gentile regions. Several cultural realities and textual details show why this matters.

- Josephus identified the people of Tyre “as our bitterest enemies.”⁵
- Israelites identified themselves as the children of God in a way that took pride in that designation and looked down on others who were not considered to be his children (Garland, 251).⁶
- “Dogs” were considered repulsive scavengers that would eat anything and not be satisfied.⁷ “The word became a term of ultimate scorn and was applied to Gentiles, all of whom were considered to be inherently unclean . . .” (Garland, 251).
- Tradition said, “as the sacred food was intended for men, but not for the dogs, the Torah was intended to be given to the Chosen People, but not to the Gentiles” (Garland, 251).⁸
- The woman seeking healing for her daughter was “a Gentile” (ESV), literally “a Greek” (Ἑλληνίς, *Hellēnis*; see NET), “a Syrophoenician by birth” (v. 26).
- The Decapolis (vv. 31-37) was also “a culturally pagan region” (Garland, 252).

Jesus’ exchange with the woman in vv. 24-30 must be understood against the backdrop of his primary mission. Many “assume that Jesus himself must have included Gentiles in his ministry” as a matter of course (Hooker, 184). In fact, he was Israel’s King, as Mark made plain. Matthew said Jesus’ mission was “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10.6), and in his account of this story, added, “He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’” (Matt 15.24).

Yet, significantly, Jesus helped the Syrophoenician woman.

- First, Jesus was willing to meet the woman’s need, even “congratulating her determined and reverent appeal.”⁹ Unlike the Pharisees, he was as ready to save Gentiles as Jews.
- Second, Mark adds a phrase Matthew’s parallel (Matt 15.21-28) lacks: “Let the children be fed *first*” (πρῶτον, *prōton*; v. 27). “This statement seems to anticipate the possibility of a later ‘feeding’ of others like the woman” and that Jesus’ preaching to Israel “did not preclude a later mission to the Gentiles” (Hurtado, 116). It effectively foreshadows Paul who said the gospel went “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Ἕλλην, *Hellēn*) (Rom 1.16; see Acts 3.26; 13.26-48).

Jesus’ response to the people of Decapolis who brought the man with the speech and hearing problems and the way he treated and healed the man adds emphasis to the first lesson we’ll highlight: Jesus prepared the way for offering God’s gifts to whoever will receive them, without reservation or restriction. The first believers followed suit (see Acts 15.9-11). So should we.

How To Receive the Gift

The woman’s response to Jesus’ effort to deter her is exemplary. We aren’t told why she came to Jesus; perhaps she had heard from others from Tyre who had been to hear him and find healing

(see Mark 3.8). She was desperate for her daughter to be cured and obviously believed Jesus was the one who could do it (vv. 28-30). Her “tenacity and humility . . . wins her Jesus’ blessing” (Hurtado, 119). Two things stand out and remind us of the universal nature of salvation.

1. Like some other Greeks who would approach him (John 12.20-22), she came to see Jesus. He is the place of salvation (Acts 4.10-12), “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14.6). Some practice of religion is part of following him (cf. Jas 1.26-27), but the focus must always be on him.
2. She demonstrates the basis in Jesus’ ministry for the principle, later stated by Peter, “that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10.34-35). That principle is both receptive and demanding. “Jesus *wants* to save everyone” is true; “Jesus *will* save everyone” is not (cf. 1 Tim 2.4; 2 Pet 3.7, 9; 2 Thess 1.8-9; Rev 14.9-10).

What Happens When People See Jesus?

What differences in outcomes might we observe when we grasp and practice the last point? Notice the response of the people of the Decapolis to Jesus’ healing of the man they brought to him.

1. Verse 36 says they proclaimed it everywhere. Mark’s word (κηρύσσω, *kērussō*) is the one he used for the proclamation of John the Baptist (1.4, 7), Jesus (1.14, 38-39), the twelve (3.14; 6.12), the healed leper (1.45), the cured demoniac (5.20),¹⁰ and the expectation and command relative to what the church was to do (13.10; 14.9; 16.15, 20).
2. Verse 37 shows why: they saw something in Jesus they had to share. More than one modern observer has wondered if much of what ails the church in America is that we don’t have that. We’re busy with church things, but often are devoted to serving one another at the expense of proclaiming to our Syrophoenicians and impaired.

A Final Self-Examination

A few years ago, I heard a member of an inner city church describe their ministry to reach out to exotic dancers. Women members would go into the clubs, do considerate things for the girls, and, given the opportunity, tell them about Jesus. They had experienced some success in getting some of the women out of that life. And some of those women, in turn, had become active in reaching others.

That may not be our calling, but like Mark 7, it does call us to some self-examination.

1. Who are our Syrophoenicians? Do we respond to them like the Pharisees and scribes did or do we follow the example of Jesus?
2. What do we see as the answer to their real problem? Religion only? The form of it with which we are most comfortable? Or Jesus as the only way?
3. Are we so convinced that we will “proclaim it all the more” (v. 36, NET)?

Think about these things. What is your response?

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Notes

¹ http://www.reverendfun.com/add_toon_info.php?date=20080616&language=en. Accessed September 4, 2014.

² The issue is prejudice, but I do not intend to limit it to ethnicity or socioeconomics. Some have been rejected as conversion candidates because they commit the wrong kind of sin. See, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture citations are from the ESV.

⁴ See also the problems caused by Christian Pharisees in Acts 11.2; 15.1-6; 21.21; cf. Gal 2.3-15; 5.2-11; 6.12-15; 1 Cor 7.18-19; Eph 2.11; Phil 3.1-6; Col 2.11; 3.11; Tit 3.10. The specific issue in each of these texts is circumcision.

⁵ Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.70, as cited by David E. Garland, "Mark," in Clinton E. Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 250. In an endnote, Garland adds, "See also Isa. 23; Jer. 25:22; 27:3; 47:4; Ezek. 26-28; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9; Zech. 9:1-2. In Matt. 11:21-22, Tyre and Sidon are equivalent to Sodom and Gomorrah" (312).

⁶ Regarding this, Garland includes an endnote in which he references Deut 32.6; Isa 1.2; Jer 31.9; Hos 11.1; Rom 9.4.

⁷ Some have suggested that the diminutive form of the word "dog" points to lap dogs that had been made pets and thus the reference here is less offensive and more affectionate in tone. See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 182. But the context of chapter 7 suggests otherwise. As Morna Hooker has observed, "there is no reason to suppose that a Gentile would consider it any less offensive to be called a 'little dog' rather than a 'dog', and descriptions of Jesus' manner and tone of speech are, of course, sheer imagination. In the present context, the term is a challenge to the woman to justify her request" (Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentary [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991], 183).

⁸ From the *Babylonian Talmud*, *b. Hag.* 13a.

⁹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 115.

¹⁰ Note that the events in Mark 5.1-20 occurred in the Decapolis. Is this why Jesus was welcomed in chapter 7 after being asked to leave the region in chapter 5?