

Mark 7:31-37

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[0 : 00] Turn with me this morning to the passage of scripture which we read together in Mark's Gospel, chapter 7. And I want us to look there from verses 31 to 37 in this portion of Mark's record of the ministry of Jesus that accounts the healing of the deaf and mute man.

Jesus had returned from the region of Decapolis, or had come into Decapolis as well, to encounter this man.

A man, we're told in verse 32, who was deaf and could hardly talk. Who was deaf and could hardly talk.

It's very difficult for us to imagine a disability like that unless either we are impaired of hearing or of sight.

A couple of weeks ago I had dealings with husband and wife who both were deeply impaired hearing-wise, not so much sight-wise.

[1 : 30] And it was at times distressing. It was incredibly awkward when you could not speak the communicate by sign language.

And it brought home to me how debilitating such afflictions are, such handicaps are.

And I'm sure you and I, and in fact we, two weeks ago, had this conversation with folks in the room who could use the sign language.

The discussion, what would we prefer not to have if we had the choice? Would we prefer to be deaf and have our sight or have our sight and no hearing?

Perhaps for many of us, we might say, well, we would prefer, and I think I said I would prefer my sight to the loss of hearing.

[2 : 34] But the reality is, from medical experts and from many impaired in their hearing, the preference is to have their hearing.

Because to be without the ability to hear puts you into a position where in many places, at many times, you're got to.

You go into the supermarket and there's a complication at the checkout desk. You can't hear what the teller's asking.

You don't know if it's a question that's been asked. You can't answer it. You begin to flush. Because behind you is a queue of people that are looking at you, staring at you, surmising, is he stupid?

Is there something wrong with her? And so on. It is, indeed, a humiliating, at times, problem.

[3 : 46] You can't ask questions. You don't hear explanations. And if it's both hearing and sight, you can't read.

But then we come to this portion of Mark's Gospel and we're introduced to the man who, we're told, is deaf and who can hardly talk.

We're told he, in some ways we're told, that it's a problem that we might surmise as not being there from birth. It's a defect, perhaps, that has emerged due to illness or trauma, simply by the fact that he can make sounds but isn't totally without the ability to say something.

And then there's something lovely in the narrative as well. Because, by and large, in the culture of this man's time, sensitivity and care was not in abundance.

And yet this man seems to have around him some that love him so much that they're prepared to do certain things for him. I wonder if it's perhaps they've heard in the grapevine what has already been achieved in the life of the man down at the caves at Gadara.

[5 : 21] how that man who was, by all accounts, out of his mind, was touched by the Nazarene and found subsequently to be clothed and in his right mind.

I don't know. But word is filtering through that this Nazarene, this incredible teacher of the law, this man that comes about talking about the kingdom of God in now a predominantly Gentile area has

the ability and power to heal.

And so out of their love for him, they bring him to Jesus. And we're told in verse 32, they beg him to place his hand on him.

And then there's recorded by Mark a very detailed account of what took place. I have to confess that probably for years I've read this and glanced through it without fully appreciating the detail that Mark takes in recording the healing of this man.

Because it is detailed. If you pause and you read verse 33, through to the culmination of the miracle in verse 35, you see the process.

[6 : 57] We read in verse 33, He took him aside, away from the crowd. Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears.

Then he spat and touched the man's tongue. He took up to heaven. He then looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, Epapha, which means be opened.

At this the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak. Why did Mark take the time?

I think part of the reason is to share with you and me some fundamental lessons. Lessons that we'll come to in a moment.

But I want you to work through the process and imagine how it took place. And how sensitive our Lord was. He takes him aside.

[8 : 01] He doesn't perform the miracle in front of spectators, in front of crowds who were around. This man has said enough in his lifetime of giggles, of finger pointing, of tongue wagging, of disdain in the facial expressions of those that have watched him in so many different embarrassing situations.

Have you ever observed someone with handicap in the situation or context of embarrassment? In a supermarket? At a bus stop?

Getting in or out of a taxi? Jesus takes him aside. He takes him away from the spectators, from the crowds.

He takes away in a sense the man's person to save him the embarrassment that had been so much part of his life. And then we're told by Mark he thrusts his fingers into his ears.

He touches his tongue with spittle. He looks up to heaven. He sighs and he speaks.

[9 : 28] There are several reasons why he did that. We've already mentioned one. I think also inbuilt into the process of Mark's record is a reminder to us that Jesus is meeting this man where he's at.

And he's in a sense using what we might call sign language in the presence of the man. When he puts his fingers into the man's ears he's saying to the man who has never heard for years I'm going to do something before you're hearing.

When he wets his tongue it isn't that he's being disgusting he's in a sense looking into the man's eyes and he's saying in a little while you're going to speak you're going to be able to use words that you've never used for a long long time.

And when he sighs you say what's the implications of that? When he sighs the deaf man can't hear the sign but the deaf man can observe the facial expressions he can see the inhaled chest of Jesus and he knows that what Jesus is doing there is indicating to him his real empathy and concern for his condition.

And again if we're asking why Mark takes the time to detail all this in such a way I think it's also to remind you and me that there is a contemporary lesson in all of this because you see since the healing of the Syrophenician a woman a woman's daughter he'd ministered in Gentile a territory some would say he was even something in the region of eight months here which when you take the length of his earthly ministry that's almost a third of it spent ministering to Gentile people to people who knew nothing of the scriptures nothing of the law who knew nothing of Jehovah as the Jews did and the elaborateness with which

[12 : 02] Mark took the time to process the healing of this deaf and mute man is in a sense to show us how we can communicate and can reach and can touch and needfully touch the world around us that is without God and without hope and I think that's why there is time there is time well spent just thinking simply about the process that Jesus took first of all the look of Christ we're told in verse 34 that he looked up to heaven he's being accosted by these friends of this man we don't know how young or old he was we're not privy to his age but he wasn't a particularly old person

I assume and he's accosted by these friends of his that love him so much that believe Jesus has the potential or the power to do something for him in his disability and as Jesus takes him aside away from the crowd as he enters into the sign language to calm the man to assure the man that what's going on here is not some magical process but something away beyond what he can imagine possible the first thing that we're told Jesus did was he looked up to heaven before the healing took place that is and therein is an indication to us of something that has ever been true of Jesus' life to date in fact of his life for the whole duration spent on earth that it was a life of continual communion with the father a life of continual prayerfulness the only place in the scriptures that we learn that that communion was broken was on the cross itself which we read part of the narrative this morning as Matthew recorded it that moment when on the cross he cried

Eli Eli lama sabbathani my God my God why have you forsaken me that's the only occasion that this communion is broken to this moment his life ministry that is has been fast and furious Mark's gospel is a gospel that is characterized by action and you sense from the moment you open Mark's gospel that the life of Jesus was one of perpetual busyness there is movement all the time and yet here in the midst of all that busyness time is taken out as this miracle that is going to astound overwhelm the people with amazement time is taken out to commune again with heaven and I think that is the lesson for us if we are seeing this as part of a model for us to reach the world out there whose ears are still deaf to the wonderful message of God's redeeming love we too need the upward look we too need to recognize the priority of prayer and it's not too difficult to appreciate why that needs to be stressed for all of us if we're a young couple with young children it is incredibly easy to discover our lives as basically on a treadmill from the moment they get up in the morning to the moment they go to bed at night it is one perpetual motion it is one incident after another and as parents we accept that as part of the role of parenthood meeting the needs of our children but the question I'm asking do we meet the greatest need in the midst of the dizziness of our parenthood or our parenting do we simply from time to time stop come off the treadmill pause a little and look upwards and pray to the

God of heaven who has gifted the children to us to be gracious to them to be merciful to them we're given in the process of our lives to meeting the needs of our workplace and if ever there was a time when the workplace has that habit of absorbing our maximum energies emotionally and physically it is the present day and if we're good Christian people we will recognize that we have a responsibility to be good diligent employees but in the midst of meeting the needs of our workplace do we remember the place of communion with God if it's not in the home or in the workplace it may be in the life of the community or the church so many demands so many pressures so often we fail to see the importance of that which is indicated in Jesus' upward look the place of communion the place of prayer and it goes for ministry the same full time ministry we can be going from morning to night and you know subtly sometimes in the midst of that busyness we can even say to ourselves well God will understand God will understand I didn't give time today or I didn't spend time today in communion with him therein I think lies part of the challenge there should not be such busyness in our lives that we do not take time out to spend time in the presence of God in prayer someone has said by observation looking at the Christian church of our time that there are certain great threats to it sensuality and materialism are seen as two of the great threats to the Christian church but running close to those is the lack of prayer if we would give light if we would give sight to the blind one who said we must ourselves be gazing into heaven but then notice secondly his sigh in verse 34 first of all he looked up to heaven and then we're told with a deep sigh said to him

[20 : 01] I said already that compassion and caring weren't too fashionable in the times of this man's experience but the sigh of Jesus communicated something incredibly special it brought it must have brought immense calm into a very fraught and tense situation because when this man who couldn't speak is face to face with Jesus and he sees and sighs how calming that must have been because he saw that it was something that was coming from within the man it was communicating compassion in a sense Jesus was saying to him without saying anything I am with you I understand I am feeling for you and it is something he had always done in John 11 we are told of the occasion that he went to the tomb of Lazarus and when he went to the tomb of

Lazarus we are told he was moved deeply in spirit and troubled and that word moved deeply in spirit are words that would be used to describe a horse snorting an agitated horse snorting such was the distress of Jesus that his body literally trembled and perhaps as he comes alongside this man sees his distress observes his shyness cannot but take on board that this man has no longer

got an ego in his personality he's got a hurting heart he sighs just as he did at the tomb of Lazarus Faber says no place as sorrows are more felt there is no place that earth's sorrows are more felt than in heaven and here

Jesus is face to face with one of the human races poor souls we might say and he's hurting for him he's feeling for him and there again I think both is a lesson for us and a challenge to us I don't think any of us are meant to go through life dry eye that goes for us men folk as well it's not macho to cry is it to show obvious emotion the older I get the less I believe that I think we have to and I think as God's people the world over we have more and more got to come in contact with the reality of the world that's hurting and be unashamedly touched by it to weep with those who weep unashamedly it's not a sign of weakness never believe that you remember

Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 1 oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears tears when we in measure can sigh like Jesus what are we saying to the world that we're reaching or seeking to reach we have compassion for you can I ask you by way of challenge this morning in Aberdeen are you a compassionate people a really compassionate people do you sigh for the folks that you come in contact that are obviously hurting people the disabled person at work the handicapped trying to get on to a bus do you feel for them rather than see them as a frustration keeping you in the rain when you can get on much quicker do you weep for the reality that is experienced by those who divorce do you sigh deeply for those that you know whose lives have been spoiled and distorted because of human depravity do you what about the reality of death itself do you simply with cold evangelical stiff upper lips say well it is appointed unto men once to die and basically say let your theology kick in

Jesus sighed so should we no matter what it takes we should show that reality but then thirdly he looks up to heaven with a deep sigh he says to the man a pastor and this is all after he had touched him took the man aside put his fingers into his ears spat and touched the man's tongue the touch of Jesus the look of Jesus the sigh of Jesus the words of Jesus they're all there but the touch is equally important he's never been one from the beginning of his ministry to shy away or to recoil it from touching what is diseased

[26 : 56] Luke Luke tells us in chapter 5 verse 12 of the encounter with the man with leprosy and leprosy was a very very you would say anti-social disease to contract in this generation generation from the moment the first signs were seen it was it was a very very short time from there to being ostracized from being in the position of perhaps having a home having a family having children having a job being part of the community it was a very very short time from the moment that leprosy was diagnosed to losing everything your home your wife and the embrace of your wife and the joy of your children the security of your employment and the sense of belonging to a community you were an outsider very very quickly and Luke tells us of

Jesus' encounter with the leper in 512 and so much so that he tells us and Mark also records the same incident in 141 of Jesus being moved with compassion perhaps it had been something like 20-30 years before that that leper had known the touch of a human being either the embrace of his wife or the hug of his children or the handshake of someone in the community a long long time and it's a beautiful beautiful picture to keep in your mind of Jesus my friends when you're seeking to model your life that it might impact the world in which you're living and I'm living and me too why why is it beautiful why here did Mark take the time to tell us that he put his fingers into the man's ears

I suppose part of the answer would say instinctively Jesus is saying to the man I'm going to take care of you I think also it's saying to the man who can't speak who can't lip read I'm going to do something for you I understand what your predicament is but surely theologically there's something even greater there whether it's in the touching of the leper or in the touching of this deaf individual this deaf and mute individual theologically it is saying something almost by way of parable that here is God manifested in the flesh here here is literally the incarnation in evidence him taking flesh him becoming flesh that through his flesh he might touch and he might heal isn't that what the incarnation did he who knew no sin became sin that through him we might become righteous the righteousness of

God he touched him and there again as time is gone is the challenge to us the lesson as well as the challenge the lesson is there to reflect on why did he touch him he did touch him and he touched him because he felt for him he could have healed the leper all these years who had suffered leprosy for all these years he could have healed that man with a word he could have even willed it and he

would have been whole but the man who had never been touched in so many years was touched here this deaf and mute man who perhaps has only been touched as he has been bundled out of cues pushed aside from pillar to post perhaps is now touched by one who really feels and I think the challenge to us is obvious and I think it's been part of the challenge to the church in generations we go back into church history why was it the church of

England in the days of Wesley struggled to make an impact it was by and large because the church had distanced itself from the reality of the human race it had distanced itself from the real needy people of its world and along comes one like John Wesley and he's forced to meet that people where they are in open fields it's exactly the same isn't it in London some 200 years later in the experience of Booth he looks at the church and where the church is and what the church is doing and he's asking obviously the question is the church touching the world of London the real needy peoples of Spitalfield and a shortage and his obvious conclusion was that it wasn't and in order to touch it in order to touch it meaningfully and you would say incarnationally the salvation army is born my friends there's your challenge in

[33 : 15] Aberdeen the word speaks for itself the word of God remains the power of God unto salvation we believe that let's always believe that let's not shy from communicating it but God in his wisdom expects more than just his word he expects his people to meaningfully communicate with him in prayer he expects his people like Isaiah did cry oh that you would rend the heavens and that you would come down are you doing that here he expects you to keep looking heaven word he expects and he needs your sigh my friend the last thing

Aberdeen needs is clinical called Christian people who get up in the morning go to work come home attend a midweek meeting on a Wednesday go to church on a Sunday and feel really nothing for the world around them let the world know that you feel for them and my friends don't be afraid to touch them either can I close with a quotation found it this morning and it's all over the place here but it perhaps helps us understand the importance of touch because many of us in the Christian church are sometimes afraid to get our hands dirty what will people think what will the Kirk session think what what what and so we we live in our little sheltered worlds without touching the real needy people of our time my friends touch them

Dr. Paul Brand he was an exceptional man who never thought himself particularly exceptional but a friend and colleague of Paul Brand founder of the leprosy mission said this of him from his work many thousands of individual lives have been transformed and enriched it wasn't just the surgical techniques that Paul worked on it was the people I've often watched him as he engaged with patients assessing their disabilities and deciding what would best meet their needs I noticed he never concentrated solely on the hand or foot he had so gently he held so gently and intimately he looked at the patient's face looked into the eyes Paul was concerned for the individuals their personalities acknowledging and valuing our common humanity he spent a lifetime working with the people affected by leprosy doing his utmost to destroy the stigma of the disease and rebuild the lives of those destroyed by it in so doing he recognized the extraordinary gift of pain that the rest of the world usually takes for granted within each person he treated he saw a broken spirit full of pain as well as a broken body which felt no pain and in each person

Paul bran saw the image of God in our society all around us in our family circles in our places of work are what one has described the rotting flesh of humanity will you be like Jesus and touch it amen