

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – July 8, 2018

Mark 7:24-30

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

(Note: This text is NOT one of the given readings for this particular week in the Revised Common Lectionary. So don't worry that the links below take you to materials for another calendar date – that is simply an aberration for this week!)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Mark 7:24-37

(From *Homiletics*; “Sparring Partners” – September 6, 2015)

Mark 7:24-37 constitutes what may be seen as two separate events in Jesus' healing ministry in Mark. The first (vv. 24-30) describes the healing of a Syrophenician woman's possessed daughter, and the second (vv. 31-37) details the curing of a deaf man. While these episodes are quite different in several respects, both highlight Jesus' healing power and the secrecy about his identity in the gospel of Mark.

Verse 24 opens with a gesture to the theme of secrecy that appears not only in this passage, but throughout the gospel of Mark. Jesus enters a house desiring not to be seen, but an unnamed woman takes note. The woman is identified first in relation to her child: a daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit (v. 25). However, verse 26 offers further identifying features of the woman based on her ethnicity: She is Greek and a Syrophenician. Given the specification that the woman is Syrophenician, the term "Greek" here seems superfluous, and thus may be serving as a functional synonym for "Gentile," as it is used elsewhere in the NT (cf., e.g., Acts 14:1; Romans 1:16; 2:9-10; 1 Corinthians 1:24; 10:32; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Thus, the contrast between the unclean Gentile woman (by association with her daughter) and the clean, Jewish man is heightened.

Nonetheless, the woman boldly presents her request that Jesus exorcise the demon from her daughter. There is a shift here in the description of the possessing entity. In verse 23, it was described as an "unclean spirit," whereas the term "demon" is used for the remainder of the pericope (vv. 26, 29, 30). It may be that the singular use of "unclean spirit" in verse 25 is intended to indicate more about the difference between the woman and Jesus, than it is to say something meaningful about the entity possessing the daughter. In any case, though, the difference between an "unclean spirit" and a "demon" is probably negligible.

Verse 27 presents one of the more problematic elements of this passage. Jesus implicitly compares the woman and her daughter to dogs by stating that food intended for the children (presumably, Jewish people) should not be thrown to the dogs (presumably, Gentiles such as the woman and her daughter). Jesus uses the diminutive form of the Greek word for "dog" here (κυναριον rather than κυων), and so his statement could be meant to compare the women to "puppies." However, given the ancient context in which dogs were often viewed as unclean street scavengers, it seems unlikely that this softened sense is intended. The contrast between the dogs and the children further suggests that this kinder view is not what Jesus intends. Furthermore, the woman's response in verse 28 suggests that she understands Jesus' comparison as an insult. However, the woman refuses to accept the full force of this offense, and, instead, she uses the metaphor that Jesus has introduced to suggest that even she and her daughter are worthy of the "crumbs" from Jesus' table. The reference to food here is particularly fitting, given that

this pericope is placed between the two miraculous feeding stories in the gospel (6:30-44; 8:1-10).

Where the woman's retort could be viewed as snippy, Jesus evidently respects her persistence. On the basis of her words, he dismisses her with the promise that the demon has left her daughter (v. 29). The reversal that Jesus demonstrates in his willingness to perform the miracle from verse 27 to verse 29 is unparalleled throughout the gospels. That an unclean, Gentile woman should be the cause of such a reversal is even more astounding. Verse 30 provides a clear conclusion to this pericope, assuring the narrative's audience that Jesus' promise has been fulfilled and that the demon has left the daughter.

Verse 31 marks a shift in the scene as Jesus travels from Tyre to the Decapolis. A nameless "they" bring to Jesus a deaf man. The identities of the man's bearers, like those who carried the paralytic (2:1-12), are left unspecified. The request for Jesus to lay his hand on an ailing individual echoes a similar request made by Jairus earlier (5:23) and reflects a method of healing that Jesus frequently uses in Mark (1:41; 5:41; 6:5; 8:23, 25). Despite the request for Jesus to lay hands on the man, Jesus adopts a rather unusual procedure for healing by putting his fingers into his ears, spitting and touching his tongue. In antiquity, saliva was sometimes imagined as conveying healing or magical properties. Jesus also uses his saliva later in the gospel to heal the blind man at Bethsaida (8:23). For the healing of the deaf man, however, even more actions are evidently necessary as Jesus pronounces the word "Ephphatha." In Jesus' speaking of an Aramaic pronouncement at the moment of healing, one might be reminded of the scene of Jairus' daughter's healing where a similar pronouncement effected the healing (5:41).

As in the preceding pericope about the Syrophenician woman, this pericope, too, includes a clear statement to the narrative's audience that the afflicted individual has been restored (7:35). Whereas the previous pericope hinted at Jesus' desire to remain hidden at the beginning of the story, here the theme of secrecy appears at the conclusion of a healing account. As elsewhere in Mark (cf. 1:44; 5:43; 8:30; 9:9), Jesus enjoins secrecy concerning his work and his identity (v. 36a). Nonetheless, the word about him spreads (v. 36b). A nameless "they" appear again in verse 37 to render a verdict about Jesus' work: He does everything well. Despite this affirmation, as has already been seen in Mark, not all of Jesus' audiences will share in this approbation (cf., e.g., 3:6, 22; 6:1-6; 7:1-5; 8:11).

While the two miracle stories contained in verses 24-37 differ in several respects, both illustrate Jesus' healing power. Furthermore, both accounts gesture in some way (vv. 24, 36) to the theme of secrecy about Jesus' work and identity that pervades the gospel of Mark. Just as this secrecy does not stop the word about Jesus spreading within the narrative, so, too, does the gospel itself stand as testimony that such witnesses to Jesus will not ultimately be silenced.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out another commentary available for these texts (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?