

“EPHPHATHA!”

Mark 7:24-37

Key Verse: 7:34, “He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ (which means ‘Be opened!’).

This passage contains two miracles of Jesus. What is unique is that these events both happen in Gentile territories. We know that Jesus spent most of his time in primarily Jewish regions such as Galilee and Judea. Jesus was born into a Jewish home and his Twelve disciples were all Jewish. Indeed, in Jesus is all the fulfillment of God’s promises to the Jewish people. But Jesus was born not just for the Jews, but for the whole world. Yet at this point, his message and ministry were still focused on the Jewish people. One reason was that it was not yet time for Jesus to be presented to the entire world. Still, his disciples had more to learn and receive from Jesus, and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Another reason was that God intended to bless the world through the Jewish people, by his one-sided grace and choice. By his sovereign choice, God chose Abraham, and promised to bless all nations through Abraham. And it was Abraham’s descendants—the Jews, who would be the first to bring the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to the whole world.

The majority of Christians today are not directly from Jewish backgrounds, but rather are from Gentile, that is, non-Jewish upbringings. This fact should make most Christians (like you and I) humble and thankful. We don’t deserve anything from God. It is truly God’s grace and mercy that anyone’s ears and eyes and heart are opened to trust and obey Jesus Christ. May this be all the more clear and impressed on our minds and hearts through the two Scripture passages we are hearing today.

First, a woman of faith and humble wisdom (24-30).

Jesus left Galilee and went to the vicinity of Tyre, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Tyre was thoroughly Gentile. There were severe prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament against Tyre. The wicked queen Jezebel was from Tyre. Clearly, Jesus was getting away from the Jewish crowds and leaders who were both hounding him. Jesus entered a house and didn’t want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. Jesus’ fame was spreading far and wide, so that even deep in Gentile territory he could not keep his presence unnoticed. Someone recognized Jesus and his band of disciples and word began to spread.

Look at verses 25-26. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

We learned several things about this woman. First, we see her desperate situation. Her little daughter was possessed by an impure or evil spirit. How could that happen? The Bible doesn’t tell us, but I have a few guesses of what could’ve caused her demon-possession. Perhaps her parents were divorced. Her father is not mentioned. Maybe he was abusive to his wife, or even to his daughter. Perhaps it was a death in the family or a traumatic event. I know a woman in her thirties now who started having mental illness symptoms only after her mother died 7 years ago. It’s likely that many more people than we realize need healing and deliverance from the power of demons and evil spirits. Who can rescue them? Only one stronger than the devil. Only Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. May our Lord Jesus heal many as they trust in his mighty

Name! Some of our children are not on the path of righteousness and salvation to God's kingdom. From this woman, we learn to bring our desperation and earnest prayers to Jesus for his mercy and deliverance.

A second thing we learn about this woman was that she was a Greek. The Greeks were famous for their wise philosophers, like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Did you know that Socrates died 400 years before Christ? Here's a famous quote of Socrates: "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." He also said, "There is only one good: knowledge, and one evil: ignorance."¹ How about Plato, the student of Socrates? Plato's most famous work is the *Republic*, which details a wise society run by a philosopher. Plato also founded the Academy, which many consider to be the first Western university, where he stressed science and mathematics.² And how about his student, Aristotle, who died in 322 B.C. Britannica says that Aristotle was "one of the greatest intellectual figures of Western history...the author of a philosophical and scientific system that became the framework and vehicle for both Christian Scholasticism and medieval Islamic philosophy. Even after the intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, Aristotelian concepts remained embedded in Western thinking."³ So this woman could've been very proud of her Greek background. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1Co 1:22-24)

The third thing I notice about this woman is her faith, combined with humility. She came humbly, begging Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. She obviously believed Jesus could do it, or else she wouldn't have come and asked him. She approached Jesus in a way that the gospel writer has already noted is successful when coming to Jesus: on her knees, pleading humbly. Mark says she "fell at his feet." So did the Gerasene demoniac. So did Jairus. So did the bleeding woman. This Greek woman could've approached Jesus as an intellectual saying, "I've heard it said of you that you can drive out demons. Would you mind demonstrating in the case of my daughter?" Mark doesn't tell us her exact words, but Matthew does. In Matthew's gospel, she said, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly" (Mt 15:22). She does call Jesus "Lord" later in Mark's passage. In fact, she seems to be the only one in Mark's gospel to call Jesus "Lord." She really knew who Jesus is. And she was not even Jewish!

How did Jesus respond to her request? Actually, Jesus' response is quite shocking and to be honest sounds racist to our ears. Jesus told her, "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." In his commentary on this passage, William Barclay proposes two explanations for Jesus' words. First, the word for "dogs" is "little dogs," more like puppies, rather than wild, stray dogs. Second, Jesus' tone was most likely playful, perhaps with a smile, rather than mean-spirited. We don't know Jesus' tone since we don't have an audio recording or enough detail in the text to tell us. What we do know is that Jesus never sinned, so he was not a racist. We may not fully understand Jesus' words to her. The ESV Study Bible says, "It is reasonable to conclude that Jesus spoke as he did merely to

¹ Google search.

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plato>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristotle>

test the woman's faith." I agree with this, that Jesus wanted to see if she had the faith, the humility, and the persistence to be blessed by Jesus.

So did she? Before we look at her reply, let me ask you: how would you have responded? I don't know about you, but I think it would be somewhat ordinary to reply in anger, "Did you just call me a dog? I can't believe it!" Perhaps some swear words in retaliation might also be a normal reply. So, her response is quite surprising. She replied, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Her reply was indeed wise and humble. Did it come from her Greek background? Perhaps. But I suspect it came from her humility, that is, her humbleness. Proverbs 11:2 says, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom." The Bible says in several places that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

We see that this Greek woman really listened to Jesus' words. Actually, out of nowhere Jesus talked about bread, children and dogs. It's almost like he changed the subject. She asked Jesus for help to heal her demon-possessed daughter. But Jesus didn't talk about demons or daughters or healing. Jesus said, "First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

I wonder if this woman might have been wealthy, for only wealthy people would have had pet dogs. It is said that Tyre was a wealthy city as well. Perhaps she had a pet dog. I have two dogs and one of them, PB for "peanut butter" likes to sit under the table while we are eating, hoping to get something at the end of the meal. In any case, this woman really listened to Jesus' words and took them to heart. When she did so and accepted them fully, she got wisdom and inspiration. For one thing, Jesus said "first." First means there's a second. When eating at a buffet, people go for seconds after everyone has had firsts, because seconds are leftovers. The woman understood that pet dogs get leftovers. The woman did not become angry or defensive or despondent at Jesus' words. She listened to Jesus carefully and took Jesus' words a step further and persisted in her request for his mercy. May God give us such humility and wisdom to listen carefully to Jesus and take his words to heart.

Jesus then told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. This was one of Jesus' long distance healings. He didn't even need to see or touch her daughter. Jesus is sovereign Lord, Lord over diseases and demons. Let's earnestly come to Jesus in prayer for those whom we love who are sick or demon-possessed.

Second, deaf ears are opened and a mute tongue speaks plainly (31-37).

Jesus left Tyre and went further north through Sidon, then down to the Sea of Galilee, and into the region of the Decapolis. This too was Gentile territory on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Remember it was here that Jesus drove out the demons from the Gerasene man into the herd of pigs, and the people there asked Jesus to leave. But the man he had healed went and told everyone what Jesus had done for him. In that same region, some people brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

This man reminds us of the paralyzed man who was also brought by friends to Jesus. Consider this man's situation: he was deaf and he could hardly speak. Of course, deafness and muteness are often related, since a deaf person cannot hear sounds, or form words properly. Hearing and speaking are the most common means of human communication. But this man could not hear

peoples' voices. He could not hear music or thunder or birds, like crowing roosters or cooing doves. He couldn't hear his name being called or the words "I love you" from his parents. He couldn't hear his baby crying. In addition, he couldn't speak or sing, and even if he tried, he couldn't hear himself. He lived in silence.

Jesus took the man aside, away from the crowd, giving him personal attention. Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then Jesus spit and touched the man's tongue. Why did he do this? I believe Jesus was showing the man what he was going to do. Jesus was planting faith in the man, faith to be healed of his deafness and muteness, to restore the full operation of his ears and his tongue.

Jesus looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which is Aramaic for "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly: "Hello! I can hear! Praise the Lord! Thank you, Jesus!" Jesus indeed restored his hearing and his speech! Praise Jesus!

Can you imagine the wonder and awe of this man who could hear and speak? With modern technology, some people who were once deaf, have been enabled to hear. Babies or children can hear their parents say, "I love you." Parents can hear their children call them "mommy" or "daddy." I searched out a few short video clips of those who were enabled to hear by medical miracles. Here are two:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WJPuaymS6o> at 5:45-6:10

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INQN6zD_PHg at 5:45-6:05

To have ears to hear is indeed a blessing. But we often take our hearing for granted. Jesus said, "If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear. Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more" (Mk 4:23-24). When we studied Revelation last year, Jesus' exhortation to all the seven churches was "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7).

Here we learn two things that are very important regarding hearing: what we listen to, and, how carefully we consider what we hear. Earlier I mentioned Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who have greatly influenced the world with their teachings. Even so, their teachings could not be equated with the wisdom of God or the gospel. Their teachings could not give people salvation and eternal life in God's kingdom. None of them had the audacity to make any such claim. But Jesus said in John 5:24, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life." Only Jesus made such a claim.

People listen to so many lies and deceptions and conspiracies. People listen to so many sinsick people, who don't live godly lives, and who don't lead people to the truth or to real freedom. But Jesus said in John 8:31-32, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Moreover, many people regard Jesus' words on the same level of a talk show host or self-help book or horoscope or fortune cookie. To them, Jesus' teachings are simply from a pool of wisdom of many so-called experts or philosophers or pop stars or comedians. But Jesus is on a whole other level. Jesus said in John 8:24, "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins." So how seriously we take Jesus'

words is of critical importance. Said simply, we need ears to hear and a heart to receive Jesus' life-giving words. To some people, Jesus' words are offensive. To others, Jesus is like any poet or philosopher. But to those who truly believe, Jesus' words are the words of eternal life.

Sometimes I watch youtube videos of Ray Comfort, an Australian evangelist, who likes to preach on crowded beaches in California. I'm surprised to hear in these videos how some young adults who grew up Christian misquote or reject the Bible. They didn't listen to Jesus well. Yet there are some, a remnant, who are eager to listen to and follow Jesus, and to accept his word as truth. Thank God for those among us who listen to Jesus' words carefully and humbly. It can be discouraging when it seems that so many people are eager to listen to the soothing lies of the world, rather than to Jesus. But in their souls they are seeking the truth. Let's keep speaking the words of eternal life to them, and let's keep praying that their ears and hearts may be opened by the grace of Jesus our Lord.

We all need ears to hear Jesus' words and a tongue to speak it. When we hear the word of God and receive it correctly, we can speak it correctly. May our ears be opened to distinguish between God's word and the world's opinions and lies. May our ears be opened to listen to Jesus seriously and to know his word as the word of life, salvation and truth. And may our tongues be loosened to share the word of life with others who need to hear it, and to praise God. In Jesus' name. Amen.