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(Mark 7:31-37)

Introduction

There is a series of videos on YouTube called the “Try Not to Cry Challenge.” These videos portray particularly emotional scenes, like blind people seeing for the first time, or colour blind people seeing colour for the first time. Some of them portray people, having received cochlear implants, hearing sound for the first time. I lasted about fifteen seconds trying not to cry!

These responses help us to realise something of the scene before us in this text.

This story is only recorded by Mark of the four Gospel writers. Mark, no doubt, wanted to emphasise to his Gentile readers Jesus’ care for and ministry among Gentiles during his three years of ministry before the cross. But I would suggest that there are two other reasons that Mark recorded this story: first, to highlight the sad plight of being spiritually deaf and mute and the need for Christ’s power to overcome this; and, second, and related to this, to highlight Jesus as the restorer – the one who brings about the new creation.

This story serves as a prophecy, promise, and picture of the restoration that Jesus Christ brought and continues to bring to this broken world. As we study this passage, we will do so under several headings, which remind us that the words “be opened: so long ago were a command from the sovereign Saviour to a sinner to be restored.

As regularly indicated, Mark had a specific objective in mind when he penned his Gospel. He was not merely writing the reminiscences of Peter and others concerning what they learned from Jesus. Rather, he was writing to Gentile believers with the goal of encouraging them that King Jesus is building his kingdom. The kingdom of God had come, and it was multi-ethnic. They were a part of something certain and sure.

But, in keeping with this goal, Mark writes with literary skill, choosing to include some material while excluding other material. So when we come to a text in Mark, like the one before us, we need to keep our eyes wide open for connections exist with what has been recorded before, as well as after. I think that will help us to understand better the intent of Mark for the material he records.

It seems clear that this episode points to the spiritual obtuseness of both the disciples and the majority of the Jewish nation. They were deaf and needed to hear; they were mute and needed to speak the truth of the gospel kingdom. When they heard Jesus say “Ephphatha!”, they concurred with the crowd, indeed: “He has done all things well” (v. 37).

So, as we delve into this passage, though we should marvel and rejoice and be encouraged by the miraculous and compassionate work of Jesus, we should also listen to what it says to us about the danger of our own deaf and muteness. It should move us to ask the Lord to open our ears and our mouths.

We will study this text with a view to being exhorted and encouraged that Jesus is able to open spiritually deaf ears and our spiritually closed mouths for our good and his glory.

The Long Way to Restoration

David informs us that “the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord” (Psalm 37:23). Here we have an example of this, as the one who is truly good seems to take the long way around to reach a man who was in great need: “Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis” (v. 31).

We can learn from this that, though it may take a while, Jesus always shows up on time – not a moment too early or a moment too late. Though this man was in need, it seemed like Jesus was taking his time. But his timing is always spot on.

If I was going to Durban, I would not go via Pretoria. But that, in effect, is what Jesus did when he headed for Decapolis.

Decapolis is east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Tyre is northeast of Galilee with Sidon another 30 km north. Jesus left Tyre, headed north for 30 km and then turned east, before travelling far south. If you look at a map it seems that Jesus was deliberately avoiding the more populace region of Galilee.

This makes sense in the light of v. 24a: “And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon.” As we saw, this was a deliberate departure. Jesus did not stay where he was not wanted. It is sad, but the Jews in Galilee were losing their opportunity to receive the benefits of God’s Messiah. They were losing their opportunity to be blessed by

God's Saviour. Be careful about spiritual deafness. Don't presume on God's grace (see Psalm 2:10–12).

This journey of Jesus reminds me of when Israel departed Egypt for the Promised Land. According to Exodus 13:17–18, God did not lead them via a direct route. Rather, for their benefit, and for God's glory, he led them in a longer route. Here we have the true Israel following and fulfilling a similar pattern: a circular loop. It was not very efficient, but it was effective. Clearly Jesus was on his Father's mission and timetable and under his directions.

The Hope of, and the Help to, Restoration

As always, Jesus could not be left alone: "And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him" (v. 32).

The Faith of Friends

Mark doesn't provide a lot of detail, and none of the other Gospel writers include this story, so we can only surmise the intention of these friends who brought this man to Jesus. If they were seeking a blessing on their friend, they came to the right person. If they were seeking healing, they likewise came to the right person. For they had come to the promised Messiah.

Whoever these people were, this man was blessed to have them in his life. They cared. The words "they brought to him" imply that they carried him to Jesus. They came alongside him and then came alongside Jesus and begged him to do something for him.

To be deaf is to be disadvantaged, in so many ways. In a world of sound, to be deaf is to be cut off from so much. Historically the deaf have been treated with disregard. They have been misunderstood and even demonised and often ostracised. Perhaps this was so in Decapolis. But, as in the life of Hellen Keller, some people were compassionate toward this man and sought his welfare. They came to the right person and he made things right.

We should pause and consider our treatment of those who are different than us. We can learn from these unnamed friends, and from Jesus' interaction with this man, to be compassionate to the disadvantaged and the often ostracised. We should do what we can to get them to Jesus.

It is reminiscent of the four friends who brought the lame man to Jesus, and who were so committed to getting him help, that they tore a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was ministering (2:1–12). As there, these friends "brought" (carried) this man to Jesus. For what reason?

Perhaps they merely wanted Jesus to lay his hand of blessing upon him. Perhaps healing was not their major goal. Perhaps they simply had a burden for the difficulties faced by this man and so they wanted Jesus to bless him, to encourage him amid his hardship.

His hardship was that he was “deaf and had an impediment of speech.” The latter problem does not mean that he was unable to speak but that he spoke with much difficulty. This is often the case when a person is deaf.

This man could not hear and, with reference to verbalising his thoughts, he was apparently greatly hindered. His friends came to Jesus and “begged him to lay his hand upon him.”

The word “begged” translates a word that means to come alongside to help, to comfort, to exhort. They cared for this disadvantaged and perhaps even oppressed man.

But there is a lesson far deeper here than merely physical restoration. We need to apply this to our opportunity and responsibility to bring the spiritually deaf and mute to Jesus. Joseph Seis says it so well,

The man or woman who has never been brought to Christ, has no ear for the sweet music of the Gospel, and no tongue for the praises of God. Everything preaches to them of heaven, and of the way thither; but they do not hear. Everything calls upon them and urges them to open their mouths, and confess unto the Lord; but never an intelligible word of good or faith issues from their lips.

Like the man in the text, they are deaf, and they are mute. Like him, they have not yet come to any right self-consciousness. They do not so much as realize their own situation, so as to think of applying for relief, until someone with better sensibilities takes hold upon them, and leads them to the Saviour. They mingle with the crowd in our churches, and gaze upon the scenes about them there; but it is nothing more to them than a sideshow. They inwardly hear nothing, and they spiritually take no part in the blessed utterance. They do not even know how dead they are to the higher world of communion in which they move. What they need is to be brought to the Saviour, that he may put his fingers in their ears, and touch their tongues with moisture from his own, and speak his almighty Ephphatha upon them.

Missionary Success

But how would they have known about what Jesus could do? How would they know of his compassion and the blessings that he was willing to bestow upon those in need? The answer is found in this same region of Decapolis where Jesus caused quite a stir back in chapter 5.

Jesus delivered a man of a legion of demons, thereby putting him in his right mind. You might recall that, in response to Jesus’ powerful work of grace, this man desired to forsake his homeland and to follow Jesus wherever he went. But Jesus rejected his plea and rather

told him to go home and tell them about the great things the Lord had done for him. He thereby became the first Gentile missionary.

Now, upon Jesus' return, we learn that this man's ministry had been fruitful. Rather than these inhabitant of Decapolis begging Jesus to leave (5:17), they begged him to stay and to bless.

Perhaps here we have an example of the power of a gospel testimony. The one who had experienced the power of the Lord transforming his life had a credible story to tell others. They heard and were given hope. Let this be an encouragement to you to share what God has done in your life with others.

The Touch of Restoration

Jesus responded very kindly: "And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue" (v. 33).

Here we see Jesus providing this needy man with a private audience. It is a scene that speaks of Jesus' concern, compassion, and capability to do something constructive in the life of this beleaguered individual.

We should note that Jesus responded to the requests of this man's friends. The one who could not make his own plea was blessed to have others do so on his behalf. This teaches us the importance of prayer for others. Praying for others is just one way to bring people to Jesus.

In taking him aside, Jesus respected this man as an individual. He was treating him with dignity rather than as a sideshow. He cared about this person and touching him made this even clearer. Edwards helpfully notes, "In removing him from the crowd, Jesus signifies that he is not simply a problem but a unique individual."

The man may have been disadvantaged, and he may have had physical debilitations, but he was still a human being and therefore made in the image of God. Someone I recently read noted, "The parents of a special needs child may not be able to make life 'fair' for him, but they can make it joyful." That is helpful.

We don't know what caused this man's deafness, but according an accomplished ENT that I spoke with, most likely he was deaf from birth. Life had not been fair to him. And yet friends wanted him to have hope. They wanted him to have joy and so they brought him to Jesus to be blessed by his touch.

We should do the same. I recently had opportunity to teach a pastors' conference in a very poor area in another part of our country. It was wonderful to see great joy amid what many would consider to be unfair.

But this personal encounter does more. As Calvin summarises, "By touching the tongue with spittle, he intended to point out that the faculty of speech was communicated by himself alone; and by putting his finger into the ears, he showed that it belonged to his office to pierce the ears of the deaf."

The Prayer for Restoration

Jesus then directed a prayer to his Father: "And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly" (vv. 34–35).

Jesus touched this man but in what follows we see that heaven came to earth. Jesus looked up to heaven, sighed and then he spoke in Aramaic: "Ephphatha." The result was a miraculous healing. The man's ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. What a wonderful transformation.

The Upward Look

Jesus never worked independently of his Father. We see this throughout his life and ministry. We have an example in Mark 6:41 when he looked up to heaven and prayed as he commenced the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. He ministered and miracled relying on the Father.

Jesus looking up to heaven "meant, 'It is God alone who is able to do this for you.' Jesus wanted the man to understand that it was not magic but God's grace that healed him" (Ferguson).

Never minimise the power of prayer. As has been well said, you can do more than pray, but you can never do more until you pray.

An Insightful Sigh

Mark writes that Jesus "sighed" as he interacted with this man. The word means to groan and it appears several other times in the New Testament, though nowhere in the Gospels. Paul uses the word in Romans 8:23 and 2 Corinthians 5:2, 4. It appears in Hebrews 13:17 with reference to how church members sometimes cause elders to be grieved to the point of groaning. And it appears in James 5:9 when James exhorts church members not to "grumble" against one another. As we recently saw, this is an inward groaning against one another.

Though another term is used, Jesus groaned (or sighed) at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:33) and Mark records in 8:12 how Jesus sighed in deep disappointment at the unbelieving response of his generation.

In all of this, we can appreciate that Jesus was moved by the brokenness of the world. There is a lot of brokenness in the world over which to be broken: effectively parentless children who must raise themselves; children who die prematurely; etc. Jesus is not unmoved by the brokenness of our world. He really does care. Even though this brokenness is a reality for which each of us is in some way culpable.

How do we respond to brokenness? How should we respond?

But there is perhaps something else behind this sigh. Joseph Seis comments:

There was much danger in the new capacities about to be bestowed. Luther has well observed, that “our beloved Lord knew what an amount of suffering and sorrow is occasioned by tongues and ears. The greatest mischiefs that have afflicted Christianity, have not arisen so much from tyranny, persecution, murder, and pride against the word, as from the small bit of flesh which has its home between the jaws. This it is that does the greatest damage to the kingdom of God.

The power of speaking is especially the power of sinning; the power most difficult to keep within control; the power whence worlds of iniquity originate. And knowing well what fires of evil are in danger of being kindled by loose tongues and open ears, he sighed to speak the word that set them free.

Finally, perhaps this sigh was partially due to the knowledge that, even though the crowds would witness his power, many would still reject him. How sad that people exposed to the gospel choose to remain deaf and mute. This is testimony to the depravity of man and to the need for God’s sovereign grace.

The Proof of Restoration

There are several proofs here of restoration.

Correct Speech

The word “plainly” derives from a Greek term that forms the first part of the word “orthodontist.” The word *orthos* means straight or correct. Whatever speaking difficulties this man had were removed by the touch of Jesus. Jesus, literally, straightened him out – at no charge. It was purely by grace.

Yet grace produces wonderful opportunities to show our gratitude. No doubt this brother would have, like the Gadarene evangelist (Mark 5), told far and wide how Jesus had touched

him and changed him. His new ability to speak would be used to the glory of God – at least initially.

Do you find, when Jesus touches you, that you are keen to brag on him and to praise him and to use your tongue in the way of righteousness? I remember when the Lord graciously grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and converted me how I spoke well of him to any who would listen. I remember being careful about my speech and how it was cleaner than when my mother used to wash it out with that terrible tasting soap!

But over time, too often our speech needs to be “orthosed,” corrected, and straightened out again. Have you ever considered how often the Scriptures addresses the speech of God’s people? There are repeated injunctions to avoid corrupt and harmful and destructive speech. We are exhorted to speak truth, rather than lies. As Solomon instructs, there is both death and life in the power of the tongue. Be careful how you use it (Proverbs 18:21).

Opened Ears

The word translated “opened” means to open thoroughly. It is found five other times in the New Testament (Luke 24:31, 32, 45; Acts 16:14; 17:3). In each of these instances (except the last), it refers to an opening of one’s understanding by God.

In the first set of uses, it is found in the context of Jesus expounding (literally, “opening up”) the Old Testament Scriptures.

On the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), Jesus encountered some very confused disciples. They were deeply confounded over the recent crucifixion of Jesus and now the added news that his grave is emptied. Some women have even said that they saw him – alive!

Jesus disguised himself as he joined them on their journey. Jesus began to explain (open up) the Scriptures (v. 32) to them, describing how they point to Jesus as the promised Messiah who would suffer death at the hands of men and then rise from the dead. As a result, they received a case of spiritual heart burn (v. 32). But they still did not properly hear, and apparently their continued confused speech revealed their hardness of heart.

But once they reached their destination, Jesus did with them what he promised them the night of his betrayal: He broke bread with them (cf. Matthew 26:29). As he did so, Luke records that their eyes were opened, and they recognised him (v. 31). Their spiritual understanding was opened.

Jesus then disappeared again. The disciples then met with the Eleven and shared with them what had happened. As they did so, Jesus again appeared (v. 36) and pronounced *shalom*. He encouraged them that he was not a phantom but rather the crucified and risen Messiah! We are then told that “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (v. 45).

Here's the point: Jesus enabled, empowered, and equipped his disciples to grasp spiritual truth. As he faithfully opened the Scriptures, he at the same time graciously opened their eyes and their minds to understand what they were now hearing for the first time with truly spiritually opened ears. "Only the touch of Jesus can enable true hearing, seeing, understanding, and witness" (James Edwards).

How desperately we need opened ears as we engage with the Lord's word in our devotions, or perhaps throughout the day.

It seems to me that Mark had such an idea in mind as he recorded this incident. After all, up until now the only one who had shown any spiritual insight had been the woman of Syrian-Phoenicia. The disciples had repeatedly demonstrated an inability to properly hear the teaching of Jesus (see 4:13, 24, 40; 6:52; 7:17–18).

I think this was the underlying purpose of this miracle and certainly what was underlying Mark's motivation for recording it. It all fits so well in what had happened: instruction followed by demonstration of Messiah's transformation of the new order (clean and unclean distinctions falling away, 7:19), followed by a demonstration of Messiah's ability to open ears—that is, to open understanding and to enable right speech. The disciples one day would experience this and this episode would serve as a wonderful reminder of the power of Jesus to do so. I think we all could use such encouragement.

Like Jesus, there are times when we must patiently rebuke. Like Jesus, there are times when we have to let the hardened go their way. Like Jesus, there are times when we rejoice at those whose ears are opened while we hope for better things for those who still just don't get it.

In the meanwhile, we are to faithfully, prayerfully proclaim the truth of God's word trusting him to open the ears and hearts of those whom he chooses. There are still Lydias in this world (Acts 16:14). And even in the Thessalonicas of our society some will have opened ears (Acts 17:3–4).

The Proclamation of Restoration

The man whom Jesus had delivered from demons had been instructed to go home and tell his friends what Jesus had done. This time, it was different.

And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

(Mark 7:36–37)

“This miracle reveals the sad state of to which sin has reduced humanity, and the power of Christ’s word to restore all” (Seis). That is, it serves as a reminder of the new creation that had come with the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, he does all things well. James Edwards comments, “The Son’s work in redemption is like the Father’s work in creation: it is done well and leaves nothing to be desired.”

Understandable Disobedience

This is becoming a familiar refrain. Jesus commanded silence about his miraculous works and those he commanded disobeyed him. Though disobedience is not excusable, in this case it is at least understandable. After all, Jesus has done all things well. Perhaps Wessels is correct: “There can be no doubt that for Mark the significance of this miracle was the proclamation of the Gospel in the territory of the Gentiles, a sign of the messianic activity of Jesus.”

Messianic Melody

This passage no doubt is written with the knowledge of Isaiah 35 as backdrop.

Isaiah 35 is a glorious promise and picture of what will take place when God’s appointed and anointed Messiah comes to rule over his people. Verses 35–36 inform us that, when Messiah arrives, “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”

This scene is a fulfilment of part of that promise. Messiah had come! Hence France notes, “The healing of the deaf and dumb was a matter of particular amazement, for these are two of the elements in Isaiah’s vision of the blessing which will result from God’s own eschatological coming (Is. 35:5–6).”

Earlier in Decapolis, Jesus commanded the delivered man to go home and tell his friends what the Lord had done for him, and he obediently did so (5:19–20). Again, no doubt this had something to do with the warm acceptance that Jesus received upon his return to the region. But here, Jesus commanded silence. Why?

Perhaps because the same thing was occurring here in Gentile territory that was occurring in Jewish territory: wrong Messianic fervour.

There was a clear and present danger that the crowds would treat Jesus as a magician, or merely as a miracle-worker rather than understanding that he is God’s Messiah; they were in danger of missing out on the fact that he is God, and therefore his healing of this man was a display of God as creator, or if you prefer, God as re-creator.

I think we have a clue to this in the phrase, “He has done all things well.” I agree with commentators who see in this phrase an echo of the words of Genesis 1:31, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” Though in the scene before us it is not God but rather the people that made this observation, nevertheless what had just transpired was a work of renewal; it was a work of restoration.

Restorative Purpose

Ever since the fall in the Garden in Eden, God has been working towards the restoration of a very broken creation. This is a fundamental concept underlying the establishment of God’s kingdom through the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has come to bring God’s rule to God’s people in what is to be a glorious place. This is one reason Jesus speaks of the fundamental need to be born again if one will be given access to God’s kingdom (John 3:3, 5). The old, fallen, sin-cursed creation cannot inherit God’s new glorious and sin free creation unless it experiences a new creation!

This is what being born again amounts to, as Paul makes clear in several passages, perhaps most notably, 2 Corinthians 5:17: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away and behold all things have become new”. Again, he writes in Galatians 6:15, “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” This is what is meant by the word “regeneration” as in Titus 3:4–5: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus also used this term when he said, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28).

I say all of this to help us to see that this scene points us to something else, something that is far greater than physical healing. It points us to the glorious spiritual re-creation of sinful people enabled by the grace and the power of God to be able to hear the voice of God and to be able to speak words that please God. Thankfully, this spiritual re-creation means that spiritual deafness is removed!

A most important question facing us all is, are you born again? Have you been regenerated? Have you been spiritually renewed? That is, are you able to hear the word of God or are you and I spiritually deaf? Think with me about this.

I once preached a sermon from Acts 2 titled “If I Preached Your Funeral.” I highlighted evidences from vv. 42–47 that were displayed by those who gladly received the word of God, were baptised and added to the church (v. 41). The point I made was that those who are Christians, those who are new creations in Christ will manifest specific evidence of this.

Among the various evidences, such as love for the brethren, the ability to discern spiritual truth is another (1 Corinthians 2:14–16). So, I ask, are you able to understand God’s word? In the words of Jesus, do you have “ears to hear and a heart to understand?” (see 4:9, 23; 7:16). Have your ears been opened?

If so, then in addition to thanking God, spread the news far and wide! You have been saved by God’s grace and renewed by his glorious power. If you have not, then beg Jesus today to open your ears. Repent of your sin, asking Jesus for mercy to touch you to change you.

But this miracle also points us to the glorious promise that yes, physically, one day those who have had their ears opened (see Psalm 40:6) will be restored to perfection: no more deformities, no more disease, not more decay and no more death. Rather an immortal body that will never experience brokenness—of any kind—ever again. This is all because of the holy and helpful humility of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In commenting on this passage, Sinclair Ferguson writes concerning this miracle, that Jesus “had done it quietly, modestly, and, most of all, graciously. His sign language was, in a sense, an acted parable of his incarnation—he had entered into this man’s world of silence and spoken the only language he could understand.”

We celebrate this each Lord’s Day, but in the coming week, we do so in a concerted way. God became man in the person of Jesus the Christ. He lived the perfect life that we could never live. That is, his ears were always opened to the Father (cf. Hebrews 10:5–10 w/ Psalm 40:6–8). He lived a perfectly sinless life. That’s good news because he could then die as a substitute for sinners whom God would touch and bring to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. When he rose from the dead, his substitutionary death for believing sinners was vindicated. Therefore, all who come to him asking for his forgiveness and for deliverance from the wrath of God will receive it. They will be given opened ears to hear his word, and released tongues to declare his praise. That is astonishing. And contrary to those in Decapolis, we are to proclaim it!

In closing, let us reflect on God’s kindness to us in Christ Jesus. Christian, you have been touched by the creator. You have been graced with the privilege to hear the truth of God and to speak both to and for God. Let us make the most of that privilege. Let us listen to his word. Let us speak in a way that is correct, because it is straight in accordance with God’s word. And let us look for opportunities to tell others. The restriction on those in Decapolis has been removed. Let us go forth and preach the gospel to every creature. Who knows but that when you do so, Jesus may miraculously enable them to hear. Like you, perhaps they will hear and heed the gracious and sovereign command, “Be opened!”

AMEN