

Mark 7:24-37

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

Pastor Tim Pauls

All Things Well for All People

The Word of the Lord from Mark 7:37: "And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, 'He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus does all things well: He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. He fulfills the prophecies you heard in the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 35. He proves Himself to be the long-awaited Christ. That's enough for joy all by itself, but don't miss *where* He performs these miracles.

This is fresh off last week's gospel lesson, where Jesus declared all foods to be clean. That was no small thing either, remember? When Jesus declared all foods clean, He said that some laws in the Old Testament no longer applied – He set aside the law of God, given by the Lord Himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Who could do this? Only God Himself. By setting aside God's law, Jesus unequivocally declares that He is God in human flesh. In fact, this thirty-year-old carpenter's kid from Nazareth is effectively saying, "I'm making some changes to this law, because I'm the One who gave it to Moses in the first place."

This has got to be giving the Pharisees serious heartburn as they watch Jesus go about His ministry. Remember how Mark 7 has gone for them so far: it started with them criticizing some of Jesus' disciples because they didn't wash their hands before they ate, because the Pharisees have built their fence and drawn their lines to make sure they remain clean before God. In response to their rules about washing, though, Jesus told them that they had replaced God's law with their own traditions. Then came last week's text, where He declared all foods clean.

There's little doubt that the Pharisees are stinging: the same rabbi from Nazareth, who had the gall to tell them that they had replaced God's law with their rules, has the audacity to set aside God's law about clean and unclean foods as if He has the authority to do it. They're more than a little miffed.

On the other hand, if you're a Pharisee who's always looking to see the glass as half full, I suppose you could find yourself thinking this: "Sure, Jesus has made a mess of our laws, but at least He still respects the fact that we're God's chosen people. At least He hasn't blurred the line between Jews and Gentiles." That would be a big line: in normal conversation, the Pharisees often refer to Gentiles as "dogs." They say it without a second thought. If you're a Pharisee looking for some comfort, you can say that despite everything else that Jesus has done, He hasn't crossed that line.

But then we arrive at today's gospel lesson, where Jesus departs and goes away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. That's way up north and on the coast: long before you reach the city limits, you'll probably find the billboard that says, "Welcome to Gentile Country!" Tyre and Sidon are not known for pious living: they're port towns full of vice and excess, and they're a region where Old Testament Canaanite gods still get a lot of love. Jesus has gone to lie low for a while: but no matter how much He'd like it, He can't be hidden. The Word has spread! Ponder that for a moment, because this is the best way that evangelism works: people have been telling other people about Jesus, and the news has spread even up to Tyre and Sidon. It doesn't matter if they're Gentiles who mostly worship false gods: even they have heard because the Word has gotten out.

One woman has heard about Jesus, and she believes what she's heard. Believing, she tracks Him down. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, which isn't too much of a surprise: false gods are dead

things with no power; but whether it's first-century Tyre or twenty-first century Idaho, demons buzz around false gods like flies near death. This little girl has an unclean spirit, and it's killing her. This Gentile woman persistently pursues Jesus and begs Him to help her daughter and cast out the demon.

Jesus' response might pull you up short. The Son of God says to this grief-stricken, believing woman, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Yup, you heard right: Jesus calls the woman a dog. Remember, though, that "dog" is a common term for Gentiles among the Jews, so He's pointing out that she's a Gentile. He even softens it up a little: if we were to put His words into today's terminology, He'd be saying something like, "If bread is for the children, you don't slip it to the puppers under the table." The statement is best heard as a challenge, as a question, with Jesus saying, "Make the case: why should I help you?"

In wisdom that only comes with God-given faith, the woman responds, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." We might paraphrase her by saying, "True enough, Lord; but the puppers still get crumbs, and a crumb from You is all I need for my daughter to be healed."

This woman is a delight, and a delightful example of Christian faith. She hears about Jesus; and as the Holy Spirit works through the Word she has heard, she desires Jesus' mercy. She seeks Him out. When He tosses her the idea that it's improper for Him to help a Gentile woman, she doesn't bat an eye: instead she says that she'll take whatever He is willing to give; and if it's only a crumb of His grace, that will be more than enough to heal her daughter. She's right!

But there's even better news: the Lord doesn't deal in crumbs. Jesus is all or nothing. He doesn't say, "I forgive you for *some* of your sins" or "*Parts* of the kingdom of heaven are yours." He doesn't say, "I'll tell the demon to tone things down so it's not as bad." No, He answers her prayer and sends the demon away.

Jesus gives all, and He gives it freely! He doesn't say to the woman, "*If* you do Me a favor or two, I'll heal your daughter." He doesn't even say, "I'll make sure the demon stays away *as long as* you continue to obey My commands." He simply sends the demon packing at no cost to the woman at all.

He's not done in our gospel reading either, is He? He leaves Tyre and Sidon – it's as if He traveled all that way just to make sure that He could answer that one woman's prayers and heal her daughter. He doesn't go back to Galilee or Judea: He goes to the Decapolis, which means that He's still in Gentile-country. A man is brought to Him there, deaf and with a speech impediment. Jesus takes him aside and heals him. People tend to get stuck on the fingers-in-the-ears and the spitting parts of the miracle, but the point is that Jesus heals him. He speaks His Word, "Ephphatha," – "Be opened" – and the man's ears are opened and his tongue is released. He speaks plainly. We don't know what he says, but I'm betting he's full of praise. I'm betting that he wants to tell everyone that he can talk, and he wants to tell everyone all about the miracle.

The funny thing is that, now that Jesus has given the man speech, He wants him to be quiet: He tells him and all gathered there to tell no one. It sounds strange to us, but it really shouldn't: the problem at that moment is that people don't know enough about Jesus to give an accurate picture. They know that He's a fearless teacher who upsets Pharisees. They know that He's capable of feeding multitudes, stilling storms, casting out demons and healing all kinds of afflictions. They know He does all things well. But Jesus has yet to tell anyone the rest of the story: the Savior has yet to say how He'll save. He'll start to do so in the next chapter, when He tells His disciples that "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk. 8:31). Until then, until His death and resurrection are part of the story, people will get the rest of the story wrong. That's why you'll find that, once Jesus starts telling the disciples about His impending death, He stops telling people to be quiet about Him.

For now in Mark 7, that all lies ahead. For now, we have this great joy in our text. Jesus, who declared all foods clean in our previous gospel lesson, declares that He has come to save all people in today's reading. He demonstrates this by performing miracles, by casting out demons and healing afflictions. He fulfills the prophecies of Isaiah 35 – He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak, and *this* ought to get the Pharisees' attention: when Jesus fulfills that prophecy, He does so among the Gentiles!

He does all things well, and He does all things well for all people. He goes to the cross and dies for the sins of all. He rises again for all, and He sends out His apostles to make disciples of all nations.

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For puppers under the table like you and me today, I leave you with a few thoughts to consider.

First off, behold the mercy of God for the world. God delights to give gifts to all people, to all nations – both daily bread for this body and life, and grace and salvation for eternal life. The world tends to regard God as miserly and cruel, believing Him to be a tyrant who only helps those who grovel and obey the rules. This is how old Adam, without faith, looks at God. Let's use a simple example: let us use God's gift of carrots. Carrots are good for you, yes? They're full of nutrients and vitamins, so they are one of the countless gifts that God gives to sustain your health. The wise thing to do is to make use of carrots as God intended, perhaps with a dab of Ranch dressing. However, if you instead take a carrot and spend your days poking yourself in the eye with it, you are going to have a low opinion of carrots. You're also going to wonder what sort of a God would be so cruel as to create vegetables for the purpose of poking yourself in the eye. The truth is that God hasn't given carrots for poking yourself in the eye, but that you're misusing the gift He has given.

God gives gifts. They are for all and they are for the good of all. He gives gifts like marriage and friends, parents and children, work and pay, food and clothing, society and goods. Everything God gives is good, but sinners misuse them in bad ways, all the time. And once they've made a mess of things, they then go about blaming God for giving gifts that cause so much trouble. Knowing that sinners will do this, God has given His commandments, which you might say are a rule book for how to use His gifts properly so that they are a blessing. Sinners then gripe about the rules, break them to misuse God's gifts, and then get angrier at God for not doing what they want Him to do.

Thus the world sees God as a tyrant who only helps those who keep His rules. I daresay that God is not at fault.

When you sin, the default setting of the sinner is to blame God. You know better: you're the one at fault. As you repent of your sin – of what you have done wrong, I would also urge you to consider what gifts of God you have misused. I would then encourage you to give thanks to God for those gifts, and ask for His help in using them better in the future. It is too easy to see God as a tyrant, but look at our gospel lesson: Jesus is handing out all sorts of gifts to anyone. To everyone!

Second is this: not only does Jesus give His gifts to anyone and to everyone, but He gives them to you. It's a good thing that Jesus makes the deaf hear and the mute speak, but the man in the Decapolis was especially thankful that Jesus specifically healed *him*. It's praiseworthy that Jesus casts out demons, but the Syro-Phoenician woman is especially joyful that He cast the demon from *her daughter*. Jesus likewise specifically has mercy upon you. He doesn't say, "I baptize all" at the font. He says "I baptize *you*." He names you as He puts His name on you. He forgives your sins and gives you the kingdom of heaven.

In our reading, Jesus comes to the man at the Decapolis and touches his ears so that he can hear. The Church has long remembered this miracle at the font: in some baptismal rites, the pastor touches the ears of the one being baptized and says, "Ephphatha: be opened!" It's a recognition that,

along with forgiveness, Jesus visits in baptism to give and strengthen faith: He opens our ears so that we can hear His Word and believe it. He visits you, personally. In God's eyes, you're not a dot in the multitude of believers: He knows your name and calls you His own. That's part of the comfort of baptism.

Third, a crumb of the Lord's help is enough, but the Lord does not deal in crumbs. Sometimes when I visit people in the hospital and give them Holy Communion, they are unable to receive an entire host/wafer. In that case, I break off a piece, sometimes just a sliver. That's what I consecrate, and that's what they receive: maybe 5% of the bread they would normally receive at the altar. But what do they receive in, with and under that bread? Not 5% of Jesus, but all of Him. I use this simply to illustrate the truth that although a crumb is enough, Jesus doesn't deal in crumbs. How much of Himself died for you? All of Him. How much of Him rose for you? All of Him. How much of His righteousness does He clothe you with? All of it. How much of the Kingdom of Heaven is yours? All of it. Again, your Savior is abundantly gracious and merciful. He does all things well, not some things half-heartedly.

Fourth and finally, you have the whole story. You know that the Son of God became flesh. You know He fulfilled all sorts of prophecies and performed all sorts of miracles. You know that He died on the cross for the sins of the world, you know that He died on the cross for you, and you know that the story of Jesus is only told correctly when His cross is included in the telling. You know that He rose again for the world and for you. You know that He is coming again in glory to judge both the living and the dead.

Since you know the full story, Jesus isn't telling you to be quiet and tell no one. The news blackout is over, and He says that you are free to go and tell. You will, together, in a couple minutes as you confess the Apostles' Creed. You're free to tell family and friends and others as opportunities arise. You're more than welcome to return Wednesday morning at 9:15 as matins resumes for the school year. Don't forget, by the way, that matins begins by reminding you of the Ephphatha of your baptism: it begins with, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise." Wherever you go, you have good news to tell: news of a Lord who does not deal in crumbs, but gave His life to redeem the world and continues to pour out all sorts of blessings upon it. There is no better news to tell: why, the very fact that the devil, world and your own sinful flesh do their best to shut you up about it ought to tell you that it must be very good news indeed!

The good news is this, my fellow puppers in Christ: Jesus does all things well for all. That same Jesus who went about His work of healing and saving in our reading, is the same Jesus who visits you in His Word and Supper to say in abundant grace, "I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen