

## A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 7:24-37

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The implication of the beginning of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman and the deaf and dumb man is that Jesus got fed up with his arguments with the Pharisees and decided to go off into the country of the Gentiles and get some rest from all this conflictual debate. So he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. When he was there, he entered a house and he wanted to maintain his privacy, but he couldn't because the word got around that he was there. A woman who had a little daughter with an unclean spirit heard about him and came and bowed down at his feet.

The storyteller's tone implies that it was shocking that this woman would come in and fall at Jesus' feet. In the comment that follows, Mark explains why: the woman was a Gentile. She was a Syro-Phoenician by birth. As you know, the country on the coast of the eastern Mediterranean north of modern Israel is Lebanon. In the ancient world it was Syria and Phoenicia. Jews and Syro-Phoenicians were enemies. The Syro-Phoenicians at the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanies in the second century B.C. carried out the most brutal persecutions of Jews that had happened throughout the entire history of Israel. Many Jewish children who were killed by the Phoenicians.

The story of the mother and her seven sons who were tortured to death by Antiochus IV Epiphanies in II Maccabees 7 is the most horrific martyr story in the entire history of Israelite literature. Therefore, for this Syro-Phoenician woman to beg Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter is, in the context of Jewish memory and experience, an utter scandal. It is very important to recognize that Mark and his listeners were predominantly Jews, and the memories of the persecution of Jews by Syrians would have been very present in Jesus' day. This is what explains Jesus' hostile response.

Mark is explaining the shocking radicality of this woman who came and bowed down at Jesus' feet—that the woman was a *Gentile*, a *Syro-Phoenician* by birth and *she* begged *him* to cast the demon out of *her daughter*! This all has to be explained, and in telling the story it is important to convey the storyteller's shock and even offense that she would ask this of Jesus, a Jew. Jesus' response reflects that. His response has a tone of coldness, of even actual hostility when he replies, "Let the children be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Now it may be that Jesus was testing her. It may be that he is simply stating the realities of the relationship that existed between Jews and Syro-Phoenicians. But whatever it is, it is not nice. It is very confrontational. It is as confrontational in relation to this woman as were his earlier statements in relation to his fellow Jews who are Pharisees and scribes. Jesus doesn't get away from difficult encounters as was his implied intent at the beginning of this story. He just wanted to take a vacation and go off to the seashore and relax for a while from all the conflict. But even on vacation, he's right in the middle of it.

The woman's response is very sympathetic. The woman accepts Jesus' labeling Syro-Phoenicians as dogs and says, "Yes, but sir, even the dogs under the table will eat the children's crumbs." From a political point of view in relation to the dynamics of ancient politics, this is a diplomatically brilliant reply. Jesus responds in kind, "For saying this, you may go your way." The implication is that you may go your way in peace because the conflict is over: "the demon has left your daughter." So when the woman goes home and finds the child lying in bed and the demon has gone, the tone is one of great joy. Be sure to convey that tone in the way that you tell this story.

The second part of the story is the story of the deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. It is important to recognize that the setting continues to be Gentile territory—the region of the Decapolis. The Decapolis were the ten Gentile cities on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. These ten Greek cities had been built by the veterans of the armies of Alexander the Great some three hundred years before the time of Jesus. So in the region of the Decapolis, Jesus was again a Jew in predominantly gentile territory, as in Gerasa (Mark 5:1-20).

They brought to him a deaf man, and begged him to lay his hands on him. Once again there is a tone of pleading. In this case, Jesus does everything privately. He takes the man aside, away from the crowd. Furthermore, there is more specificity in the description of his healing than in any other healing story: he put his fingers into his ears, spat, touched his tongue, looked up to heaven, sighed, and said in Aramaic, "Ephphatha." In telling this you want to focus on the delight in the details and to enable your listeners to imagine precisely what Jesus was doing. Then, of course, at the end of this episode there is great joy and wonder that the man's ears were opened and his tongue was released and he spoke plainly. This is the description of an absolute miracle.

Jesus' response to this great joy is to order them to tell no one. But the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed. The reason that he had ordered them to tell no one is not clear; it is a mystery. In your telling, let the mystery be conveyed in your voice, "He ordered them to tell no one." Their response is one of total joy and of telling the story everywhere. You can convey that with total enthusiasm of, "He's done everything well; he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak." Convey their utter and total delight in what it is that he has done in whatever way you can. Go for it!

These are two of the most delightful stories in the whole of the gospel tradition. They are stories about international reconciliation across racial and national boundaries.