

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Mark 7:24-37

Year B - Proper 18, Text: Mark 7:(24-30) 31-37
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Prior to Mark 8:27–30, Jesus never states in words that He is the Messiah and that He must experience crucifixion. Rather, He reveals His identity through His actions (see Isaiah 35:5–6). For example, in this section, Mark describes two incidents in which Jesus ministers to Gentiles.

Mark 7:24–30

In 7:24–30, Jesus ministers in the region of Syrophenicia. The references to Tyre and Sidon in Verses 24 and 31 may not mean that He actually visited these two cities, but that He worked in the general region of these locations. It is significant that, while he was in the region, Jesus enters the house of a Syrophenician Gentile. Acts 10:24–33 tells of Peter entering the house of a Gentile Roman centurion, an act for which he was later criticized by Jews living in Jerusalem (11:1–3).

Verses 7:25–26: After Jesus enters the house, a woman bows down at His feet and begs Him to heal her daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit. (This is the first request for an exorcism of demons recorded in Mark.) In Mark’s narrative, the woman is referred to as a Syrophenician (7:26). In Matthew’s narrative (15:21–28), she is referred to as a Canaanite — a person to whom the Jews were to show no mercy but utterly destroy them (Deuteronomy 7:1–2).

Verse 7:27: In addressing the woman, Jesus uses the terms children and dogs. The Jews thought of themselves as God’s children; they thought of the Gentiles as dogs and pigs. One gets the impression that Jesus is pointing out to the woman that Jews thought of themselves as genetically special — as a “chosen people” who were to have nothing to do with Gentiles! In the Jewish mind, God’s favor and mercy were to be directed toward them alone, not to Gentiles!

Verse 7:28: Although the woman is quite open to being reminded of the superior Jewish “branding,” she nevertheless asks that Jesus grant her (as a dog

beneath the table) a few crumbs of divine mercy!

Verses 7:29–30: Jesus commends the woman for her response and assures her that her request has been granted. The demon has left her daughter. The woman returns to her own home to find that her daughter has indeed been healed!

Summary thoughts: In this incident, Jesus stretches the borderlines of His ministry far to the north and away from the Jewish center of Jerusalem. In His dealings with the Syrophenician woman, He pushes the new communal identity to its limits with regard to geography, ethnicity, and gender. Although Jesus raises the issue of Jewish priority over Gentiles, He ultimately defies and rejects that notion. The Syrophenician woman surpasses the disciples in perception and determination. In responding to the pleading of this Gentile woman, He actually helps two female sufferers — a mother and her daughter.

Mark 7:31–37

In this incident, we read of Jesus healing a deaf mute in the Gentile region of the Decapolis (the 10 cities southeast of the Sea of Galilee). Mark does not tell us whether Jesus traveled along the west or east coast of the Sea of Galilee to get there.

Verse 7:32: After Jesus arrives in the Decapolis, people (unnamed friends of the sufferer) bring to Him a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment.

Verse 7:33: Jesus, seeking some privacy, takes the man away from the crowd. Jesus touches first the man’s ears, and then his tongue with saliva-covered fingers. In relation to the use of saliva, Jesus acts as Greek and Jewish healers acted. Furthermore, because the man cannot hear, Jesus communicates through actions.

Verse 7:34: At the same time, Jesus heals the man through divinely-given power. He looks up to heaven,

sighs, and says “Ephphatha” (“Be opened”).

Verse 7:35: Jesus heals the man in three ways. He gives him the ability to hear, to speak, and know a language. After all, if the man has not been able to hear properly, how could he know a language and speak it plainly?

Verse 7:36: Although Jesus orders the crowd to tell no one what they have seen, the more He forbids them to tell others, the more they tell others what He has done!

Verse 7:37: The crowd is astonished beyond measure! Their statement that “He has done everything well” reflects “and it was good” in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. Their reference to Jesus’ actions in empowering the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak reflects Isaiah 35:5–6. The subtext is this: If Jesus does these things, the Messianic Age has broken in — and Jesus is the Messiah.

However, in the narratives that follow, Jesus endorses the fact that He is the Messiah, but a Messiah who is very different from what the people and the disciples are expecting!

Summary thoughts:

After healing the deaf mute, Jesus feeds 4,000 Gentile men (again, in the Decapolis, 8:1–10) and then heads north to Bethsaida where He healed a blind man (8:22–26). The location of Dalmanutha referred to in 8:10 is not known.

Jesus’ breakthrough toward the Gentiles is of great significance, and Mark’s narratives in relation to this issue are detailed and elaborate. After a massive exorcism (5:1–20) and a vast number of healings among Gentiles (6:53–56), an individual exorcism (7:24–30), and an individual healing in a Gentile land (7:32–37), the time comes for the formal ratification of the Gentile part of the community.

The feeding of the 4,000 Gentile men (8:1–9), the counterpart of the earlier feeding of 5,000 Jewish men (6:30–44), constitutes this affirmation. It is significant that the number seven surfaces in 8:5–6, 8. Why? In Deuteronomy 7:1–2, the Israelites are told to hate seven Gentile nations, show them no mercy, and destroy them. We might also note that the early Christian community in Jerusalem was presided over by a leadership structure of the 12 apostles and a group of seven Hellenists under the supervision of Stephen (Acts 6:1–6).