

Explore the Bible: Includes

March 20, 2019

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 7 focuses on Mark 7:25-37.*

Location, location, location. Not just a rule for real estate, this mantra has applications for the study of the Gospels as well. In the passage for this week in particular, location plays an important role in understanding the thrust of the passage in two different senses.

The early Christian writer Papias credited the apostle Peter as the source behind Mark's Gospel. If this tradition is accurate, one can only imagine all the stories Peter had to share with Mark about the one whom he first met on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Armed with these rich memories from which to draw, Mark set about weaving the narrative of the Lord Jesus. In so doing, no story was told accidentally, incidentally or without thought to its placement (that is, its location) in the unfolding story of Jesus.

Consider, then, where we find this story. Prior to the narration of Jesus' encounter with the desperate mother, Mark related a particularly significant exchange with some Jewish religious leaders from Jerusalem, the protectors of tradition and acceptable Jewish religion (7:1-23). The confrontation began over Jesus' disciples' disregard of traditions over handwashing. Jesus took the occasion to expose the obtuseness of the religious leaders as to what was really important. What mattered was not clean or unclean food or hands but the heart condition.

One has to wonder if this story was especially near to Peter's heart given Peter's own change of heart over related matters. (See Acts 10:1-11:18.)

The second important sense of location finds more meaning due to this first sense. In verse 24, on these heels of this encounter with the religious

leaders, Mark tells us that Jesus “went to the vicinity of Tyre.” More than just a trivial geographic reference, the mention of Tyre signifies that Jesus had withdrawn outside of the Galilean region where he did most of his public ministry. He had ventured a good distance to the north and east, to a land dominated by gentiles. In this context of locations, following a story undermining Jewish religious scruples and set in a gentile region, the narrative finds Jesus meeting a woman and a deaf mute.

The Humble (Mark 7:25-30)

To characterize Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophoenician woman as perplexing and uncharacteristic of the Jesus of the New Testament is an understatement! Why does Jesus seem resistant to aid this woman, especially since the affliction stems from a *real* enemy of the kingdom: an evil spirit? Why does he seem to insult passively-aggressively her as a “dog?” These are challenging questions.

For the answers, consider first the context. Jesus himself decided to venture up to Tyre, gentile country. Recall the previously narrated encounter about things clean and unclean. Notice also how emphatically Mark wants to convey to his readers that this woman was a gentile through and through.

These factors highlight the crucial message of Jesus’ encounter with the Jewish religious leaders from Jerusalem. Those who should have known best demonstrated they understood little while one who should have known little proved great understanding. Those who were considered clean demonstrated that they were unclean, while the unclean showed herself clean.

In the end, vindication came to the one willing to trust Jesus. Kingdom insight came from, but kingdom blessings went to an unlikely source.

Like the religious leaders, we may find ourselves so blinded by our self-righteousness that we fail to see where we are lacking. *When in your life has an unexpected and even unlikely individual exposed your own lack of insight, awareness or faith? Is it possible you have missed seeing such an opportunity?*

The Outsider (Mark 7:31-35)

We see once again in Mark stories brought together. From one gentile region, Tyre, Mark takes us to another, the predominantly gentile region of the Decapolis. As with the previous story, the encounter between Jesus and the afflicted is deeply personal.

William Lane stresses that the description of the deaf and mute man indicates he was not born with this condition but developed it (*The Gospel of Mark*, 266). Perhaps there was a prevailing belief that he deserved his condition (compare John 9:1). Regardless, Jesus answered the cry for mercy and pulled the man aside. The procedure to bring the man healing is surprising in its detail. Jesus' healing power certainly required no procedure as other healing miracles attest nor even his presence as the previous story showed. What's happening?

Consider the encounter not from Jesus' perspective nor from an observer. Put yourself in the shoes of the deaf mute. This man had come to experience the world through touch and sight. Isolated from the crowd and alone in front of some kind of holy man, he felt the fingers in his ears. He saw the spit. He felt the touch on his tongue. He saw Jesus' face look to heaven and the accompanying "deep sigh." He then saw Jesus mouth a word. At once a world of sound rushed into his restored ears. This miracle of healing was personal and intimate.

The example of Jesus in this passage presents us with a compelling illustration of ministry to individuals in the midst of ministry to a crowd.

How can we make the effort to make serving others and sharing the good news about Jesus intimate and personal to individuals?

The Exuberant (Mark 7:36-37)

Jesus did not come to establish a kingdom like those with which the people would have been familiar. This is why he sought to stifle the enthusiasm of the blessed (compare John 6:14-15). The people were right in sentiment (see Isaiah 35) but wrong in timing and kind. A cross awaited this king.

The command to keep quiet expired at Pentecost (Acts 2). Ours is now the ministry of proclamation of the great things God has done in Christ. The principle of this passage is worth remembering, though. *How can we celebrate the Lord's blessings but avoid advancing a kingdom that perhaps we desire?*

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