

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL EXPANSION

(Mark 7:24-37)

9.12.21

INTRODUCTION

My wife Linda and I welcomed our first daughter, Hayley Diane, into our lives back in March 1989. She was a happy-go-lucky kid, a voracious reader, and a little girl who loved her parents.

Now Hayley's dad was the minister of music at their church. That meant on Sunday mornings, her dad was playing the piano for the service as well as leading the choir. But right before the pastor came to bring his message, Hayley's dad would exit the sanctuary to go to another church service — children's church. So, while moms and dads were still in the sanctuary, a whole bunch of little dinky dudes would assemble in one of the Sunday School rooms to have a church service just for them. And for that service, Hayley's dad played the guitar. Now Hayley loved whenever her dad got out his guitar because they would sing all kinds of songs, just the two of them.

But one particular Sunday, Hayley's first to attend children's church herself. And when her mom brought her in, Hayley took one look towards her dad and immediately became very, very unhappy. Why? Because a whole bunch of little kids were sitting as close to her dad as they could get. He had his guitar out, but they were going to be singing with him. And to make matters worse, there was no place close to her dad where she could sit. Miss Hayley Diane Vesta was furious — and that's being way yonder polite. You see, her dad belonged to her. He didn't belong to any of these other people. Who did they think they were to be sitting so close to her dad? How rude!

Why that story? Because the audience to whom Jesus most often ministered believed that they were special, way more special than anybody else. They were Jews, after all, God's chosen people; He had said so Himself. God's Messiah, it followed, should also be just for them and nobody else. Anybody not a Jew? Forget about it. God didn't care about them like He did His chosen people, right?

But then here comes this Radical Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew Himself, but willing to talk to anybody, willing to touch anybody, willing to go to anybody, regardless of circumstances and with virtually no apparent concerns at all over being rendered or labeled as unclean. He had a message meant for everybody — and He was going to bring it — period — regardless of any considerations. It was a lesson that was absolutely imperative for the disciples to understand if the “church” that Jesus was planning to build was to have any chance at being all that Christ envisioned. It is such episodes that are on our agenda this morning. We'll be using Mark 7:24-37 as the foundation of our story, but we'll be sprinkling in a goodly amount of Matthew 15:21-28, where we find this same episode taking place. So, as we prepare to look again at this incredibly Radical Rabbi, **let's begin with a word of prayer.**

TEXT (Mark 7:24-37)

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre — Mark 7:24a.

When last we left Jesus, He was teaching in Galilee — possibly around Capernaum — while being confronted by some of the religious leaders from Jerusalem and their concern over His disciples’ observance or, maybe better said, their lack of observance, of the “tradition of the elders” — in this case, their fuss being about the disciples’ not washing their hands before they ate. In the ensuing conversation, Jesus redefined what foods were “unclean” — none of them — and radically redefined exactly what it is that, in God’s eyes, would defile a person. Then, following that moment, He and His disciples left Galilee and traveled northwest, coming into the “vicinity of Tyre and Sidon,” according to Matthew — in other words, modern-day Lebanon; in fact, if our understanding is correct, He was maybe within about 25-30 miles or so of modern-day Beirut. He was now most definitely in Gentile country.

And now a necessary bit of background before we proceed: One of the reasons for God establishing Israel as His “chosen people” was to become His witnesses to the nations and peoples around them; as He said through the prophet Isaiah: ***“I have revealed and saved and proclaimed — I, and not some foreign god among you. You are My witnesses,” declares the Lord, “that I am God” — God speaking, Isaiah 43:12.*** Everything that God had spoken, shown and revealed to them, Israel was in turn to communicate that to the peoples around them. That’s why the psalmist wrote: ***Give praise to the Lord, proclaim His name; make known among the nations what He has done — Psalm 105:1.*** In fact, way back in Exodus, shortly after being delivering the Israelites from Egypt, God had revealed to Moses that: ***“Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” — God speaking, Exodus 19:5-6a.*** They weren’t chosen because there was anything special in themselves, but in what God would do with them.

Now, over time, what had started out as an amazing, God-given blessing had sadly morphed into a profoundly boastful arrogance, best illustrated by John the Baptist when he saw the Pharisees and others coming out to him in the wilderness from Jerusalem as he was preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah with his message of repentance: ***“[D]o not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” — John the Baptist, Luke 3:8b.*** All those wondrous words of blessing had instead been replaced by an incredible level of self-importance and self-righteousness, creating as a result deeply held negative feelings, if not outright hate, for anybody not Jewish. That meant that Gentiles, and particularly Samaritans, were almost on a level of *untermenschen*, the German word for “subhuman” — the view that Hitler and the Nazis held for any “non-Aryan” races — which ironically included Jews. But for the Jews of Jesus’ day, that meant that coming into any contact with non-Jews, or entering any non-Jewish house, would render them unclean — unable to participate in any worship opportunities in the synagogue without a set of rituals that would restore their cleanliness in God’s eyes. So as a result, deep, deep divisions became embedded into any devout Jew’s psyche between themselves — the

“chosen people” — and anybody else. And this was the context into which Jesus was now placing Himself.

He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet He could not keep His presence secret (like always) — Mark 7:24b.

Now it seems like the worst-kept secret in the history of worst-kept secrets was often where Jesus was at any particular moment — particularly when He was trying to withdraw from the crowds who were such a constant presence.

In fact, as soon as she heard about Him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at His feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter — Mark 7:25-26.

But sure enough, He was found out — again — this time by a woman from this particular region. Now Matthew in his gospel calls this woman a Canaanite, meaning a native of Gentile Palestine — in her specific case, Phoenicia — but the bottom line is that she was non-Jewish.

Now, right from the start, this woman was facing some serious obstacles as she sought Christ’s help. First, her ethnicity was against her; she was Gentile, and Jesus was Jewish. Jews traditionally had no relationships, even the most momentary ones, with Gentiles. Second, her gender was against her; rabbis traditionally not only did not teach women but would not even speak with them. Third, as the presumed guardians of their Rabbi, the disciples were against her as, from their point of view, she was no more than a bother and a pest to their Master. Fourth, Satan was against her, having launched a battle against this woman’s daughter for possession and control. And there may have even been a moment or two where it seemed that Jesus Himself was against her.

But that all said, this woman brought some pretty interesting dynamics of her own to the moment. For one thing, she appeared to have some knowledge and understanding of Jesus beyond simply what He could do; she also seemed to grasp at some level who He was beyond the amazing man that everybody saw. In fact, before she even presented her request to Jesus, she ID’d Him: ***“Son of David” — a Canaanite woman, Matthew 15:22a.*** That is an absolutely Messianic title because it speaks to the Messiah’s prophesied human lineage. Now one could argue that she was already in worship mode before she ever got to petition mode. For another, her “falling at His feet” showed a mother’s urgency on behalf of her daughter while simultaneously approaching Jesus as an inferior approaching a superior, underscored by her calling Jesus by the title (in the Greek) *kurios*, meaning “lord” or “master.” But she was also doing all this while making a lot of noise, which Matthew notes by telling us that she was “crying out.” She was very literally clamoring for attention. And, with a mother’s heart, she was begging Jesus, passionately pleading with Him to bring an end to her beloved daughter’s suffering.

Now while Mark’s gospel gives us this information as narrative, Matthew gives us the details of her precise words: ***“[H]ave mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly” — a Canaanite woman, Matthew 15:22b.*** The particular Greek word for “mercy” used here tells us that, in another bow to this woman knowing precisely to

whom she was speaking, she was asking for Jesus to perform a deed literally based on “divine grace.”

Now this is where things get interesting; according to Matthew’s account: ***Jesus did not answer a word. So His disciples came to Him and urged Him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” — Matthew 15:23-24.***

Jesus was silent; He wasn’t saying a single word to this woman. So, the disciples, never champions of empathy, misread Christ’s silence as His maybe not being quite sure exactly what to do with this woman who very simply was not letting up on her begging and crying and clamoring. In fact, her constant pestering of Jesus may have made them simply fed up with her. What she was actually seeking, what was actually causing her so much grief, never really seemed to enter their minds. So, not surprisingly, they urged Jesus to “send her away.” And their feelings almost seemed confirmed when Christ finally did break His silence by reminding them that He came for the “lost sheep of Israel.” But because He did not address her directly, she continued without pause to plead her daughter’s case.

The woman came and knelt before Him. “Lord, help me!” she said — Matthew 15:25.

You almost get the picture that she had at first knelt near Christ when she first began presenting her case, like maybe at His side. But now, as it appeared He was ignoring her, she knelt immediately in front of Him. Her insistence on His hearing her was still coupled with the same word — *kurios*, “lord” or “master” — as she cried out so simply, “Help me!” This time Jesus responded to her, as Mark writes:

“First let the children eat all they want,” He told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs” — Jesus Christ, Mark 7:27.

Now, if on the face of it this seems like an unjustifiably cruel answer smacking of intolerance, racism and flat-out scorn, we need to remember that English by itself is a terrible language with which to approach the Scriptures — and this is a great picture of that. So, let’s start building the right picture here:

- 1) First, the word “children” was a reference to the children of Israel, which underscored Christ’s view of Israelites as His first focus.
- 2) Second, the word “dog” obviously has some negative connotation here and seems to be the most problematic term to come from the lips of somebody like Jesus. Now Jews would have labeled Samaritans as “dogs” due to their mixed racial background (Jews coupling with Assyrians following the Assyrian Empire’s conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel — 722 BC — those illicit relationships creating what came to be known as “Samaritans”) as well as their corruption of Judaism. And the very unflattering picture created by that word would have come from the scavenger dogs — basically mongrels — that roamed about the cities and towns of the time and feasted on people’s garbage. But that is NOT the picture to which Jesus is referring. The Greek word used here is speaking of “puppies.” Jesus is thinking of little puppies, household pets, and their gathering underneath a table where a family was eating, hoping that some crumbs would fall from the table to the floor.

- 3) Lastly, we can never forget that Jesus always knew what He was doing in each and every interaction with somebody — no matter their ethnicity or gender or any other considerations. Jesus is not trying to be difficult with this woman but instead is trying to draw out her faith in him. He will be there for her — does she believe that?

And then this Gentile woman, coming from an area not known for showing any kind of faith, makes a wondrous statement showing great faith: ***“Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” — a Canaanite woman, Mark 7:28.***

What an amazing answer! Despite her desperation, her faith acknowledged two realities: (1) She acknowledged the special place for the Jews, the “children” in this illustration, in God’s plan and Christ’s ministry, and (2) she was going to be content with whatever “crumbs” she would be granted. She understood that even the so-called crumbs came lovingly prepared by this Lord and Master. And Jesus was pleased!

According to Matthew: ***Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted” — Matthew 15:28a.*** And as Jesus elaborated in Mark: ***“For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter” — Jesus Christ, Mark 7:29.*** And this persistent mother’s request absolutely, miraculously was granted, for Matthew concludes by telling us: ***And her daughter was healed at that moment — Matthew 15:28b.*** And as Mark concluded in his telling of this moment: ***She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone — Mark 7:29-30.*** Wow, what a moment that must have been. In fact, there are only two times in the gospels that someone is commended by Jesus for their faith, and they are both Gentiles: the Roman centurion pleading for his servant, and this woman here. But it’s just the first of two great moments from Mark’s gospel with which Christ so graciously reached out to Gentile audiences:

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis — Mark 7:31.

Jesus went from one Gentile destination to another — from ancient Lebanon to an area called the “Decapolis” — Latin for “ten cities.” Mark is the only one of the gospel writers to record this miracle but, since his gospel was intended for a Roman audience, it would have received an immediate appreciation from those readers, as the Decapolis was thought of to some degree like a “Rome away from Rome.”

There some people brought to Him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place His hand on him — Mark 7:32.

Upon his arrival, a man suffering from both deafness as well as some kind of speech impediment was brought to Jesus, the crowd earnestly, intensely asking Jesus to bring this man healing.

After He took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put His fingers into the man’s ears. Then He spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “Ephphatha!” (which means “Be opened!”). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly — Mark 7:33-35. This is an interesting moment. Due to his deafness, Jesus couldn’t ask this guy about his own personal beliefs. It was the faith of those in the crowd that was driving this

healing. But, to keep this moment private and to avoid this guy becoming some sort of weird attraction, Jesus pulled him aside. While touching the man's ears and tongue, Mark wrote that Jesus looked up to heaven and emitted a "deep sigh." In moments like this, I can't help but think that Jesus was realizing how far the world had fallen into sin, and the ugly consequences of that fall. As the creator, who would know better than Him that this was never how things were intended to be. But, praise God, His power was greater than our fall, and this man, his body responding to the power and command of its creator, began to function normally again.

Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more He did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" — Mark 7:36-37. Just like so many other times, people couldn't keep this kind of news to themselves, no matter what Christ commanded them. And according to the Greek, they didn't just talk about it; they made proclamation far and wide about it, just like the heralds of the Middle Ages — "Hear ye, hear ye!" You might have had to be deaf to not hear them sing the Savior's praises. But it's really cool to keep in mind that these were Gentile crowds praising Jesus, reflecting the basis that Jesus had attached to his coming: ***"For God so loved the world" — Jesus Christ, John 3:16a.***

APPLICATION

You know what is one of my deepest, most dearly held memories from 9/11? Certainly not the acts of the terrorists themselves, nor of the unforgettable images of those towering skyscrapers falling to the ground. Not the posters with the personal information of so many missing who would never be coming home. Not the stories of incredible bravery and sacrifice. No. Instead, it's watching and hearing the members of Congress come out on the steps of the Capitol building and singing, "God bless America!" No Republicans, no Democrats. Just Americans. It makes me wonder: Will I ever see something like this ever again?

So why is that the memory "takeaway" for me of 9/11? It was a moment of seeing people come together, realizing that there were far, far more important things to address than the things that divided them. It was a great picture of "unity."

That is just as important for us today because, in the culture that has been created in our country today, where division is almost glorified instead of repented, we have forgotten some things that absolutely unite all of us the world over:

- 1) ***[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — Paul, Romans 3:23.***
- 2) ***Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — Paul, I Timothy 1:15b.***
- 3) ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel (those two verses above) to all creation — Jesus Christ, Mark 16:15.***

This is why that, for the disciples, I've called this particular journey with Jesus a "radical expansion." Jesus was getting them to think outside themselves, and their culture, and their traditions. That's not how He wanted them to see the world. He wanted them to see the things far, far more important that actually united them: they were united by sin, they were

united by a salvation provided by God to wash away all their sins, and they were united by a mandate — this one from their master — that the joy of new life be the fuel that propels them into the world — “all the world” to preach that same gospel that had saved them.

Likewise, our purpose is not to live in division but to live in unity — unity in our common background of being fallen sinners, unity by our being saved by God the Father by means of the blood of God the Son by the power of God the Holy Spirit, and unity by Christ’s mandated common purpose: “Go to all, preach to every!”

And in these days of such profound division in so many areas of our lives, think about this: Assuming that he died as he lived, one day Osama bin Laden has a date with God — a one-on-one. On that day there will not be a question of anything having to do with his Muslim zeal or ideology, or any of his hatreds. It will just be one question: “What did you do with my Son?” And the answer will be plainly, painfully obvious, because there will be no Son of God standing next to him — just an eternal hell waiting in front of him.

But what hit me in particular was that Osama is not going to be having his one-on-one interview with some other God. There’s not a God for Muslim nonbelievers, and another God for Jewish nonbelievers, or Buddhist nonbelievers, or any other belief systems, either. Nor will there be a unique God for Democratic nonbelievers or Republican nonbelievers. It will be the same God, asking the same question to every nonbeliever: “What did you do with my Son? Why did you think that His horrific death for any and every sin you ever committed, for any and every sin you could even think to imagine, somehow didn’t apply to you?”

CONCLUSION

The disciples saw themselves as Jews, favored children of God. That was wrong — which is why Jesus traveled outside of Israel, to show that He loved and spoke and worked and felt passionately, just the same, for everybody! Just as with the disciples, we need to see our mission as going to the WORLD with the gospel, and that the needs of people to hear the gospel is more important than any other consideration. We are here to bring people into unity with God through Jesus Christ. We all share one blood, and one humanity . . . and one Creator. We have to look past appearances or economics or lifestyles or politics and focus on just one demographic — citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. Everybody matters — no exceptions. Jesus dying for the entire world pretty much settles that. Don’t let the divisive messages of this world get in the way. This isn’t the world we’re living for. This isn’t the world we’re preparing for. It’s all about the kingdom of heaven — and anybody out there who desperately needs to hear the message of that world. Let’s pray!