The Gospel According to Mark

Mark 7:31 – 37

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We are continuing in our series in the Gospel According to Mark. And this evening, the scripture reading comes from Mark 7:31 through the end of the chapter, verse 37. So if you have your Bibles with you, please turn there and receive now God's Word.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. And they begged him to lay his hand on him, and taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears and after spitting touched his tongue and looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, Ephphatha that is, be opened. And his ears were opened. His tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 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.

Helen Keller was born on June 27, 1880, and at nineteen months old, she contracted an illness that left her both deaf and blind. Against all odds, she continued on to become a famous author, lecturer as well as a political activist, but she couldn't have gotten there by herself. Indeed, if you've heard the name Helen Keller, then you have probably also heard of her teacher, Anne Sullivan. At the age of twenty, Sullivan was hired to be the private tutor of a seven year old Helen Keller. And in that spring, she began a relationship with Keller that would last for almost fifty years. As you can imagine, initially, Sullivan found it incredibly difficult to communicate with her student, let alone teach her anything. I mean, how are you supposed to teach someone who can't hear how to speak? How do you teach someone who can't see how to write? And yet Sullivan was up for this near-impossible task. At first, she implemented a very regimented schedule in which she introduced new vocabulary words to her students. She would spell out each word into Keller's palm, and then she would take Keller's hand and place it on her own mouth as Sullivan spoke those words, so that Keller was able to imagine how those words were supposed to be pronounced. The little girl was at first resistant and rebellious, but Sullivan persisted, and it was really because of her patience and her compassion that Keller slowly took a liking to her teacher and asked. The relationship blossomed. So too, did Keller's progress. Within six months, Keller had learned about six hundred words, and eventually she was able to speak and write. And as I mentioned, she even went on to write books. In fact, she authored twelve books. The story of the relationship between these two women is portrayed in a nineteen sixty two film called The Miracle Worker. And if you have seen that movie, you will also remember that one of the reasons why Sullivan was so effective in teaching Helen Keller was because she herself was also visually impaired. Her eyesight only deteriorated as she aged, and before she passed away, Sullivan had become fully blind. And yet we would presume that her own disability not only allowed her to be an

effective teacher, but was also the reason why she was able to empathize and to show so much compassion to her student.

That last point is really why I begin with this story, because in a sense, you could say that this is exactly what Jesus does for the deaf man in our passage today, the Son of God and God himself had stooped down from heaven to earth, taking on human flesh, than standing before this man as a man, being able to fully empathize with his need for hearing and speaking. We see him stoop down even further to this man's level as he communicates to him the liberating power of the gospel of grace. As was the case last week.

Our passage this morning centers upon a single encounter and a single miracle. But through this miracle, Mark continues to answer for us the questions that we've been asking throughout this series, namely, who is Messiah? What is his mission or message? And what is our requirements or our duties as those who would follow after him? We have a short text before us, so I don't think you'll need any points to keep track. I only ask that you follow along in your Bibles. And so Mark chapter seven, verse thirty one again.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. And they begged him to lay his hand on him.

Last week, doctor Redd took us through the encounter of Jesus with the Syrophoenician woman in what is perhaps the most intriguing dialogue between Jesus and one of his patients. And if you remember, that incident took place in the region of tyre. And that passage marked the beginning of this longer section in which Jesus journeys away from Jewish territory and into Gentile territory. Verse thirty one continues to describe for us then that very journey Jesus went from tyre through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee. In the region of the Decapolis. Sidon was a city about twenty miles north of tyre. But then, after traveling north, we're told that Jesus returned south back towards the Sea of Galilee by way of the Decapolis. That entire trip, which is shaped kind of like an upside down U on a map, would have been no less than one hundred and twenty miles. And so we can estimate that Jesus spent several weeks, perhaps even over a month, on this specific journey. And it begs the question, why? What is Jesus doing here? Why is he spending so much time and energy in this region outside of Palestine?

Just very quickly, three reasons that I can think of. First, to escape from the often overbearing crowds and the hostile Pharisees. Second, to turn his attention more intimately to his disciples, however roundabout it may have been, we ought to understand that this trip had great significance as an intensive. On the field training for the twelve. And that relates to the third reason, which is that one of the primary lessons that Jesus seeks to teach his disciples is that God's purposes, his plan of salvation, includes not just the Jews, but also the Gentiles.

And so what kind of a trip is this? You could say that Jesus is currently leading his disciples on a mission trip. That's what this is. And today, we find them in the region of the Decapolis. And amidst a great crowd, they presumably the friends and family brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Now, I think all of us here have at one point tried to imagine what it might be like to be blind. And the way that we would do that is by closing our eyes really, really tight and keeping them closed for as long as we can. Most of us, however,

won't be able to keep them shut for more than five minutes because we feel so restrictive and vulnerable. And in that regard, the exercise helps us sympathize with those who are blind. Well, in a similar manner, I want you to imagine what it might be like to be deaf and mute. This may be self-evident to you, but those two often go hand in hand, especially if the case of deafness is from early on. Because if you can't hear words, it's difficult for you to sound them out to speak. Deafness is actually harder to simulate because even if you were to block your ears with your fingers, you can still partially hear. And so imagination is required. So imagine with me if your world was completely silent. Imagine if your concept of sound was limited to vibrations. You know, if I had to choose between being blind and being deaf, I think I would rather be blind not to not to minimize the difficulties and the sufferings of the blind. But I say that because being deaf means that you are cut off from the most natural and effective form of communication. You can't talk to people, you can't have conversations. And that doesn't just affect your ability to communicate, but that affects your ability to make and sustain relationships with people. You see, deafness is by its very nature a socially isolating disability. It inevitably makes you an outsider. It makes it very challenging for you to be intimate with anyone. Not just that, but it also presents an obstacle to your ability to learn. And this is especially problematic when you consider that faith comes from hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ. It presents a major obstacle to the gospel. Well, then it's a good thing, is it not, that the God who speaks is not restricted to spoken words when it comes to conveying his saving grace? As God once said to Moses out of the burning bush, who has made man's mouth, who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, The Lord. Before I move on to the next verse, I want to examine this description a little bit more carefully. We read, they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. You should know that the phrase speech impediment is only one word in the Greek, and that word appears only once in the New Testament in our passage. It does, however, appear one other time, not in the New Testament, but in the Septuagint, in the Greek Old Testament. And that's in Isaiah chapter thirty five, verse six. It's actually the verse that Pastor Greg quoted for us in his prayer. If you write notes in your Bibles, you should write down Isaiah chapter thirty five next to our passage, because Mark clearly has this text in the back of his mind as he recounts this story. Isaiah thirty five can be thought of as the last chapter in the first part of the Book of Isaiah. Section that is dominated by a series of judgments, Isaiah declares God's judgment upon the nations, and also upon Israel, his own people. It's a foreboding section, but at the very end, as Isaiah peers into the future, judgment turns into salvation. And chapter thirty five is really all about this vision of salvation when the kingdom of God finally comes. And according to Isaiah, these are some of the signs that will signal that day. Isaiah chapter thirty five, verse five, then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute. That's our word. The tongue of the mute. Sing for joy, for Isaiah the restoration of hearing to the deaf and speech to the mute would be one of many signs indicating that the day of the Lord is near, and that the kingdom of God has come. Earlier in Mark chapter one and Mark introduced us to Jesus. How did he do so? Jesus came out from the wilderness proclaiming what. That the kingdom of God is near. And so Mark would have us recognize that the healing that is about to take place ought to be understood as as signaling the fulfillment of this prophecy. And perhaps it was to the surprise of the disciples, a

shock to their Jewish system, to see that the blessings of the kingdom was being experienced not only by the Jews, but by the Gentiles.

Well, that provides us with the framework within which to understand this healing. And so now let's take a look at the actual miracle. Verse thirty three. Take a look. and taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears and after spitting touched his tongue and looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, Ephphatha, that is, be opened. Now I know what all of you are thinking. I really do. I know exactly what you're thinking. You're thinking you did. Jesus just spit into this man's tongue? Admittedly, that is odd, and it certainly grabs our attention. But don't get distracted by this one detail. The fact of the matter is, this wouldn't have appeared nearly as odd to the people who were actually there, because we see several instances, not just in the Gospels, but even in Extra-biblical material where we have various healers, both Jewish and Gentile, applying something like saliva or spit as a type of balm or ointment for medicinal and even sometimes magical purposes. That is not to say that Jesus was under the impression that his own spit had some sort of healing power, but that is to say that Jesus was comfortable employing things that were common gestures or signs that would have been easily understood by his audience as a way of communicating the greater truth of the gospel. Indeed, we see God do that throughout the entirety of Scripture, and I think that that's what Jesus is doing here by applying his own saliva upon this man's tongue. He's doing something that this man would have understood. Indeed, this is absolutely imperative that Jesus does certain things that can be understood. And why do I say that? Because to state the obvious, Jesus is addressing a man who is deaf. He cannot hear.

And so Jesus's words are of limited value compared to his actions. And so it's as though Jesus is communicating with this man through a type of sign language. Bearing that in mind, it is of the utmost importance for us to therefore pay attention to Jesus's actions in these two verses. By the way, that's quite different from the previous passage, isn't it? In which Jesus spoke almost a kind of parable to the Syrophoenician woman, where everything hinged upon the proper understanding of his words. It was the dialogue that was intriguing there. But here it is Jesus's deeds. Well, what does he do in verses thirty three and thirty four? There are six things that Jesus does six signs for this man who is deaf and mute. One the first thing that Jesus does as we read at the beginning of verse thirty three, is that he takes the man aside from the crowd. Privately, he takes this man aside. When you read through the Gospels, you see that Jesus does this again and again. You could say that it's characteristic of his ministry. Jesus has this remarkable way of making his patients feel special. And that's not a small thing. When you keep in mind that Jesus was always surrounded by a crowd in his version of this very episode,

Matthew tells us in chapter fifteen that great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others. And so the man in our story is not the only deaf nor mute that Jesus is being asked to heal in this moment. But you wouldn't be able to tell just based on our passage. And that's because Jesus took this man aside and separating him from the crowd. Jesus signifies to this man that he is not just one among many. He's not just a problem to be dealt with as efficiently as possible. He is an individual. Jesus grants this man a private audience. He lets him know you have my full attention. You know, that goes a long way, especially for people in need.

I experienced a glimpse of this through a traumatic experience I had when I was in high school. And as it is the case with most of my trauma, it involved the dentist. As many of you know, I'm an MK, I'm a missionary kid, and I grew up in the mission field in West Africa. And so unfortunately for me, what that meant was every time we went to sabbatical, back to the States or Korea, it meant that we had to take a visit to the dentist. But as was also often the case, because my parents didn't have a ton of money, I also almost never went to a normal dentist. And in this particular case, I went to this clinic that provided relatively cheap services for people in ministry and so for missionaries and pastors. When I arrived at the office, I found myself waiting in a very long line, and it was evident that the people there were very poor. Honestly speaking, I felt like we shouldn't have been there. Nonetheless, it was interesting because when I was ushered to the dentist's chair, to my horror, the chair wasn't in its own room. It was in a large hall along with about nine other chairs, and so there was no privacy at all. And I was sitting right next to two other patients as they were getting their teeth cleaned. Now I understand why they had the clinic set up that way. They were able to get through a large number of patients incredibly efficiently. But personally speaking, it was a traumatic experience, not only because dentists are the absolute worst, but also because I could hear the people next to me screaming out in pain, which made me even more nervous and self-conscious when it came to be my turn. And while I understood that this was a gracious and good thing that the clinic was trying to do, the whole process, perhaps somewhat ironically, felt kind of heartless. I was just one among many. Jesus takes this man away from the crowds privately. At no point in his ministry do we ever get the sense that Jesus tried to heal as many people in as little time as possible? On the contrary, we get the impression that he tried to spend as much time as possible with each individual.

Two. The second sign that Jesus gives promptly follows. After taking him aside, he put his fingers into his ears. And to clarify, most likely he put his fingers into the man's ears. What is Jesus doing? He is identifying this man's condition, isn't he? He places his fingers into his ears to let him know, I know what's wrong with you. You don't have to tell me. And I am about to unplug your ears. It's a symbolic gesture in which Jesus shows this man what he's about to do.

And the third sign is closely related to that. After spitting, Jesus touched his tongue. And so, after touching his ears, Jesus touches his tongue again. He's telling him, I know you're deaf and I know you're mute. And what does the saliva signify? We already. We already went over this. The saliva tells this man. I'm about to loosen your tongue. Now, as I said a moment ago, our modern sensibilities cause us to react by saying, you. That's gross. And when we think that, we're thinking that it's gross for the mute man, because all of us recoil at the thought of having someone else's saliva put into our mouths. But from the perspective of the original audience, I think they would have also experienced a visceral reaction and thought to themselves, oh, that's gross. But not for the man. This is gross for Jesus. We ought not miss the significance of Jesus so freely touching someone who is unclean. You see, this is part of the ongoing motif in Mark and in all the Gospels, in which Jesus radically identifies with the needy, the possessed, the sick, the ritually unclean. And so commentator James Edwards puts this very poignantly. I think he says, physical contact is an expression of Jesus's compassion, Love seeks intimacy.

Love seeks intimacy. And that's what Jesus is signaling here. Not just that he wants to heal him, but that he loves him.

Now, some of you may say, well, if it was commonly believed in certain circles that the saliva of great healers had magical powers, wouldn't this man misunderstand what Jesus was about to do? Wouldn't he think that it wasn't Jesus himself per se, but his spit, this balm or ointment that that ultimately healed him? And in response, I would answer by saying, that's why Jesus's next sign is so important.

So sign number four, verse thirty four, and looking up to heaven. As this man sees Jesus looking up to heaven, what does that tell him? Well, it tells him where his healing is going to come from. It informs him of the source of Jesus's power. What I'm about to do, I do by the power of the father in heaven and the spirit sent from above. As the readers were reminded of Mark chapter one, when at Jesus baptism, the heavens were torn open, the spirit descended like a dove, and the voice of the father was heard. More recently. It reminds us of Mark chapter six in the feeding of the five thousand, because right before Jesus fed the crowds, he took the fish and the five loaves, and he looked up to heaven. And in that. And in that case, Jesus looked up to heaven and were told that he also said a blessing. And so it's very possible that even in our passage, as Jesus looks up to heaven, he is also praying. So he's indicating to this man that all good things come from the father above. Jesus is saying to this man, this isn't magic, this is divine. It's not the spit that's going to cure you. It's the Holy Spirit.

Sign number five. And looking up to heaven, he sighed. Jesus sighed. Now think with me about this. When do people sigh? When do you sigh? You sigh. When you have something on your mind. You sigh. When you're stressed, you sigh. When you're depressed. When you're filled with sorrow. When you feel like you're at a dead end. When you don't know what else to say. You sigh. When you have a burden on your chest. And that physical act of sighing is your inadvertent way of getting that burden off your chest. It's your body's coping mechanism. When you say you feel kind of relieved, don't you? Hence, we have that expression. A sigh of relief. Having said that, initially, while it may seem strange and perhaps random, that Jesus sighs here, given everything that we've said thus far, I hope you can see that this is not random at all. Because what happens when you sigh? Physically speaking, that is what happens to your body. Right? Your shoulders go up, your chest comes out, and then you deflate again. It's an act that you can see. The deaf man sees Jesus sigh. And why would Jesus want this man to see him? Sigh.

I've shared this before, but about ten years ago, my mother had a stroke and for about a month she was actually in a coma and none of us knew whether or not she would ever wake up. In fact, the doctors had told us to brace ourselves for the worst. I think that might just be the hardest month I've ever lived. Every day my father would text me with an update, and every time my phone vibrated, I held my breath before checking the message. But during that time, I found at least some comfort from one of my best friends. His name is John and I would call him on the phone. And to be honest with you, I'd call him just to vent. And sometimes, in spite of myself, I would end up crying on the phone. And he said some words I'm sure that were encouraging. But you know what comforted me more than anything else? I don't remember

anything that he said. Honest to God, I don't remember anything that he said. But I do remember this to this day. Most of the time John had nothing to say. I mean, what could he say? But in those moments of silence over the phone, you know what I would hear? I would hear him sigh. And that meant so much to me because I understood that my burdens had become his. Jesus sighed. It's an expression of sympathy. Jesus is sorrowful. He's groaning within. He is burdened not by his own experience, but by the afflictions of this deaf and mute man. He's empathizing with his suffering.

So, as is the case with all of these signs, Jesus is displaying his compassion. He is entering into and identifying with this man's struggles. I can tell you one thing for certain. This deaf and mute man had spent many a moments just sitting there by himself, sighing. Oh, how often he must have felt that there was nothing he could do. Nowhere he could go. No one he could relate to how frustrating and lonely life must have been, how familiar he was with everything that a sigh could possibly signify. And so when Jesus sighs, he knows exactly what that means. And I know I'm reading into the text, but I'm almost certain that at that moment, this deaf man must have felt a certain connection because he sees that this man Jesus, my burdens have become his. And you know, this isn't just something that Jesus does for this man. Scripture tells us that this is something that God does for us all. Romans chapter eight, verse twenty six. It's a verse that you're all familiar with, I think Paul writes. ***Likewise, the spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*** Did you know that that's the same word groanings. So the spirit intercedes for us by heaving deep sighs.

Do you understand what Paul is saying there when Paul writes, for we do not know what to pray for. He's not saying that believers literally don't know how to pray, but he's envisioning. He's envisioning situations in which we are so burdened by the sufferings of this life. When we are confounded by those sufferings, when we don't know why it has to be this way and what God is up to. So that in our weakness, the words we know we ought to pray just won't come out of our mouths. In that moment, the spirit heaves a deep sigh. He groans on our behalf. He empathizes and identifies with us in our weakness. And it's for that very reason that his intercession is effective. And so this is how David Garland puts it. He writes, when we are helpless, even in praying to God for help, the spirit becomes the translator of our sighs. The spirit hears us sigh. He also sighs and he cries out to the father. In other words, the Spirit of Christ does for us what we see Christ doing for this man Jesus side.

But there's more to this sigh, I think. For the second time now, in this passage, we have a rare word. And for the second time, that word also happens to be found in Isaiah chapter thirty five. This time in verse ten. Let me read that for you. Remember, this is Isaiah's vision of the day when the kingdom comes, when salvation is poured out. Isaiah thirty five verse ten,

"and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. And why are they singing joyfully? Because sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Jesus identifies with the problem before he resolves the problem, and in this way we have here a glimpse, a foreshadow of what Jesus will do on the cross when the burden of our sins will be placed upon his shoulders. When for our sake God will make

him who knew no sin to be sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God, so that in Christ Jesus. Sin and suffering might be done away with. In the words of Isaiah, so that all sighing shall flee away."

It's incredible, isn't it? Jesus is evangelizing to a man who can't hear. He's showing him the gospel message. And I can't emphasize this enough. You can hardly imagine that this communication would have been effective if it wasn't for Jesus's compassion. You can hardly imagine that Jesus's subtle motions would have meant anything to this man if there wasn't a warmth, a tenderness, a gentleness, a sincere, tangible compassion in Jesus's demeanor. And there's a lesson here for us, I think, in our evangelism, perhaps even a rebuke. Is it not the case that we often make evangelism an exercise in efficiency? I mean, literally, there's training sessions on how to share the gospel in as little time as possible. Now, there may be a time when someone's on their deathbed and efficiency becomes the name of the game. But certainly, would you not agree? That cannot be the norm so that it's a problem. If you're willing to have a quick conversation with a stranger and get your evangelistic duties out of the way, but you're unwilling to enter into a long term relationship with that person in your office or your neighborhood or your church who is needy and who requires you to identify with their burdens, no matter how correct your explanation of the gospel, no matter how sound your theology, if you don't embody that message, if you're not living it in the very moment that you're sharing it, then what kind of a testimony do we have?

We have one last sign to look. Look at. Here's sign number six. ***He sighed and he said to him, Ephphatha, that is be opened.*** Now you might be thinking, that's not a sign. That's a word he spoke that. And that's true. But just because he spoke, it doesn't mean that the deaf man didn't see it. That word f for tha must have made an impression, Mark, since he deemed it necessary to write it down in the original Aramaic rather than in the Greek. And so he provides us with the translation. Be opened. One scholar, I think, rightfully points out that the very difficulty of the pronunciation of this word makes it very unambiguous for lip reading. F fa tha. Because the syllables are so distinct, it's an easy word to read. In other words, I think this is another sign that Jesus is intentionally visually showing this man and what an overwhelming sensation it must have been for this deaf man when he read, Jesus's lips pronounced the word be opened. And as soon as that registered in his mind all the surrounding sounds, the chatter of the crowds, the crying of the children, the barking of the dogs, all the surrounding sounds rush into his ears. And not just that, but we read in verse thirty five, his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. The man instantaneously has perfect hearing and perfect speech. It is as though he was never deaf. And you know what? That's also the way that Jesus has healed you and I.

Because when we were saved from the clutches of sin, we were saved in such a way that when we approached the throne of God and stand before the Judge Almighty, the father looks upon us. And what does he see? He sees the spotless, perfect Lamb of God. It is as though we had never sinned. It would be a terrible mistake if, after you read this passage, all you took away was my. What a mighty healer Jesus was that he was. But Jesus healings, his miracles are never an end in themselves. Rather, they're meant to reveal the greater significance of his

mission. His power to heal shows us his power to save. That's what every healing miracle, in one way or another, is meant to show us that the Messiah came to deliver man from sin.

Mark himself gives us a clue that this is the way that he wants us to understand this miracle, and the way that he describes this man's healing in verse thirty five, where it says his tongue was released, the Greek more woodenly says, and immediately the chains of his tongue were broken. That's what it literally says. the chains of his tongue were broken. It's as though Mark is saying, he who broke the chains of this man's tongue can surely break the chains of sin.

Well, the story is wrapped up with a comment from the crowds. They were astonished beyond measure, saying he has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. And what does that statement remind you of? He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. Well, I think it's meant to be yet another allusion to Isaiah chapter thirty five. Then the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. And in Isaiah's prophecy, who is it that makes the deaf hear and the mute speak? Or in the larger context of the book of Isaiah, it's very clear it's none other than the Messiah. And so our story concludes with this Gentile crowd unknowingly perhaps taking up scriptures upon their lips, singing songs of joy, and declaring Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world. And I think there's meant to be here a bit of sardonic irony that the Gentiles were able to see what the Jews were not. For it won't be until the next chapter that even Jesus own disciples are able to confess that Jesus is the Christ.

Let's pray.