

The Sympathy of Jesus

Mark 7:31-37

Bryn MacPhail / Feb. 26, 2012

This brief account of Jesus healing a deaf man is one of my favourite passages in the Gospel of Mark.

Not unlike the account where Jesus brings Jairus' daughter back from the dead, our current text gives us a glimpse of *the compassion of Jesus*.

As we have seen, Jesus is not one to parade around His abilities. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Jesus often works hard to get away from the crowds and does what He can to avoid the spotlight.

If all we ever saw from Jesus were His displays of power, we would be impressed. But, thankfully, we also get to see *the manner in which deals with hurting people*.

And what we see is massively compelling. It's attractive.

Passages like this inspire me, and renew my eagerness to follow Jesus with all that I am.

This morning's account begins with some geography. Mark is helping us to locate Jesus, explaining that He had left Tyre, traveled through Sidon, and made His way **"to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis"** (7:31).

It did not take long for a huge crowd to track Jesus down. Then **"a man who was deaf and could hardly talk"** was brought to Jesus **"and they begged Him to place His hand on the man"** (7:32).

Scholars speculate over whether the man was born deaf or whether he endured some trauma, which caused his deafness.

Either way, I think it is natural to connect this man's difficulty in talking with his inability to hear.

As I read this account, it occurred to me that I have never had regular interaction with a deaf person.

The closest example I could think of was a girl I went to elementary school with. This girl was not deaf, but close to it. I

remember that she wore rather large hearing aids. It was the 1970s, and the technology was such that there was no such thing as a small hearing aid.

I also remember how this young girl had great difficulty speaking...and we had great difficulty understanding her.

She was a nice enough girl but, as I think back, I regret that I didn't spend any time getting to know her. It certainly wasn't a conscious decision, but I suppose I did what most of the other kids my age did—we decided to connect with other kids, which we had more in common with.

I hadn't thought about this girl for decades until I began to wrestle with Mark chapter 7 and wonder what life was like for this deaf man, who had great difficulty speaking.

I suspect that he too was left out of a lot of things because of his handicap.

I suspect that, in this First Century culture, the man's disability had made him a bit of a social outsider—someone who was rarely included or called upon.

I expect that this man was immensely shy. I deduce this because Mark tells us that the man was **“brought”** to Jesus.

The man was not visually impaired. He did not have difficulty walking, that we know of. Conceivably, he could have brought himself to Jesus.

But perhaps the many years of living on the social periphery had made the man reluctant—especially with this large crowd surrounding Jesus.

I do not think it is a small detail for Mark to mention that Jesus **“took (the man) aside, away from the crowd”** (7:33).

Jesus refuses to make a spectacle of this man. Instead of playing to the crowd, I think Jesus pulls the man away from the multitude to make him feel more comfortable and secure.

Everything that follows demonstrates a similar sensitivity to the man.

You will notice that this is a far more elaborate miracle than we are accustomed to seeing from Jesus.

To the paralytic, Jesus simply tells the man to pick up his mat and go home, and the man was healed of his paralysis (1:11).

When a raging storm threatened to overwhelm the disciples' boat, Jesus commands the wind and the waves, **"Quiet! Be still!"** and immediately they became calm (4:39).

Earlier in Mark chapter 7, we read about Jesus healing the daughter of a Syrophenician woman without even being present to her daughter (7:29).

The power of Jesus was such that He did not need to engage in an elaborate healing ritual. He could simply say the word and it would be done...

But here, we see Jesus do so much more. Mark records that **"Jesus put His fingers into the man's ears. Then He spit (presumably on His own fingers) and touched the man's tongue. He (then) looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, 'Ephphatha!' (which means, 'Be opened!')"** (7:33-34).

Why the elaborate process? If one word was enough, why all of this touching?

Surely Jesus does this for the man's sake.

Jesus accommodates His procedure to the deaf man's condition. Jesus uses sign language to help the man understand what is going on.

And did you notice what Jesus does just before healing the man?

Jesus looks up to heaven—as if to communicate with the Father—and *He sighs*.

The Greek word that is used could also be translated as **“groan”**.

Why does Jesus groan, why does Jesus sigh, just moments before healing the man?

I suspect it is for the same reason why Jesus wept (Jn. 11:35) just minutes before raising Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus identifies with the pain of humanity in a profound way.

He feels deeply that which afflicts us.

We can only speculate what Jesus saw in this particular man that made Him sigh.

Did He see how this handicap pushed the man to the fringe of society?

Did Jesus see a man whose self-esteem had been crushed?

Did Jesus see a man who had been robbed of his joy?

Whatever anguish, whatever disappointment, was in the man Jesus felt it deeply.

The sympathy Jesus felt for the man was not only expressed to the man, but also to His Father in heaven.

By His heavenward glance, we see how Jesus maintains prayerful communion with the Father.

The outcome is massively positive. Jesus utters the word “**Ephphatha**” and Mark tells us, “**at this, the man’s ears were**

opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly” (7:35).

I’ve mentioned before how the gospel writers are selective about which events they record and which miracles they include.

Accordingly, we should always be asking the question, “Why this account? Why did Mark include this particular miracle?”

I think the answer lies in Mark’s desire to establish the identity of Jesus.

Mark’s burden is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God and Israel’s promised Messiah.

Mark helps us to ‘connect the dots’ by using a particular Greek word to describe the man’s speech impediment.

He uses the word *mogilalos*—a word that occurs only twice in the entire Bible.

The word is found here in Mark 7:32, and it is found in Isaiah 35, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Mark undoubtedly uses the word *mogilalos* to draw his readers back to Isaiah 35. And by doing this, he continues to affirm the identity of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah.

In Isaiah 35, there is a prediction about a future manifestation of the glory of the Lord. Here is the prophecy we find in verses 5 and 6: **“the eyes of the blind (will) be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”**

Mark wants us to know that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

But, of course, there is more for us to glean from this passage than fulfilled prophecy. I wouldn't want any of us to miss *the practical value of this passage*.

In this account, *Jesus models for us a manner for doing ministry in His name*.

We see here that Jesus' sympathy and compassion was a huge part of His ministry.

Jesus was neither cold nor indifferent as He applied His healing power to those in need.

Jesus felt deeply the pain of those He ministered to.

He groaned heavenward in prayer on their behalf.

And so it should be with us.

As followers of Jesus, we too must share Jesus' concern and compassion for those who are suffering.

We don't need to look far to find someone who is hurting every bit as much as the deaf man in this passage.

There are some bending under the weight of grief, having suffered the loss of a loved one.

There are others who have a daily battle with a serious physical ailment, which limits their activity.

There are still others who are suffering within a personal relationship that is breaking down.

We don't need to look far to find someone who is hurting.

How are we going to respond?

We need to respond with the sympathy and tenderness that we see in Jesus.

We need to look to heaven and sigh on behalf of those who are hurting. We need to pray for those who are in pain.

I am also inspired by the fact that Jesus didn't simply shout a healing command from a distance. Jesus came close to the deaf man, He walked him away from the commotion of the crowd, and He put His hands on the man.

I love the way commentator R. Kent Hughes puts it when he says, "True compassion doesn't just feel. It reaches out."

Maybe you have heard a recent report that someone you know is hurting.

How will you respond?

I hope you will *feel* for the person. I hope you will *pray* for that person. But I also hope you will reach out to that person. *Visit* them. *Embrace* them. Remind them that they are loved by you, and by God.

I often hear people talk about what they *can't* do as a Christian.

"I can't teach", or, "I can't facilitate a bible study."

"I can't work with children."

"I'm not able to lead a group or a committee."

I get that.

God has gifted us differently.

There are ministries that we might not be called to engage in.

This morning I want to commend to you something that each of you *can* do.

The ministry of expressing sympathy and compassion is something that every follower of Jesus can engage in.

Not only *can* we engage in this ministry, we *need* to engage in this ministry.

We live in world with much suffering and pain.

And behind the smiles and the pleasant hellos are hurting people.

This past week I overheard two people talking about a devastating situation. The question that kept being repeated was, “What do you *say* to a person?”

I don't think you need to *say* very much.

But it does speak volumes to be consistently present in the lives of those who are hurting.

Dear friends, I urge you make yourself present in the lives of those who are suffering.

Be a living demonstration of the sympathy and tenderness of Jesus. Amen.

