

## **The Children and the Dogs**

I've found it difficult to preach through this Gospel of Mark without recapping everything that has taken place before, so that we see the intentional flow of the narrative and how the idea is developed. But unlike my last sermon I will not recap everything here at the beginning, but instead I would like us to again remember what Mark is primarily writing to his readers about, the coming of the kingdom and the end of the exile of the people of God from the promise of redemption.

As we've talked somewhat about this theme, I just want to make sure we are clear on our definitions about the meaning of being taken out of exile into the Promised Land. In Israel's history, they were enslaved in Egypt. This slavery was literal, but it also pictured enslavement to sin that humanity is enslaved by our wicked desires. The idea of Jesus coming to bring His people out of slavery means that he is freeing them from the power of sin, and bringing them into proper communion with God. This is what Mark is referencing with the exodus narrative.

Through this Gospel, Mark has given stories about Jesus and his teaching and miracles to prove that he is the Messiah that has come to redeem Israel. If you place yourself as a first century Jew, you may be excited about what Mark is writing... until your sensibilities are shocked by what you begin to read in Chapter 7.

Now, before Mark 7 there has been only one mention of Jesus ministering to a Gentile, and that is the Gersene demoniac. Thinking as a first century Jew, you may find this odd that Jesus would minister to a Gentile, but there are numerous Old Testament stories where one sent from God ministered to a Gentile... so maybe you would move on in anticipation to read more about the redemption of Israel.

But soon after you would come to Mark 7. And it is at this point that I would like to review what the Gentiles represented to Israel. First, their eating regulations were not the same as what was laid down in Leviticus 11. They did not follow the rights for purification of unclean women or of a leper in Leviticus 12-14, or the regulations of bodily discharges in Chapter 15. Therefore contact with these Gentiles would make them unclean, cut off from the worship of Israel.

But there is yet another MAJOR factor that haunted the church for centuries after Jesus resurrection that would have been a stumbling block for a first century Jew, the issue of circumcision. Jews used circumcision as a way to distinguish themselves from the other peoples and as the mark that God was with their people. It was not only a source of national pride, but it was an integral part of worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And those males who were not circumcised could not partake in this covenant with God.

But beginning in Mark 7, we see Jesus beginning to break down some of these distinctions between the Jews and the Gentiles. But Mark unfolds this by telling his readers of the religious leaders became increasingly frustrated with Jesus' disciples.

## **The Kingdom and the Tradition of Men**

Some of the disciples did not wash their hands when they ate, which Mark suggests was tied to ritual cleanliness and therefore a proper relationship to God. There were a number of these rituals that the elders held and they were widely accepted among the Pharisees (though not all were in agreement on this issue). The Pharisees therefore question Jesus as to why he is not instructing his disciples to follow in the practices of the elders. This does not appear to be a “trap” question like some of the other Pharisees questions, but Jesus response is incredibly strong to this question!

He says, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me, in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’”

Strong response for such a seemingly innocent question! But Jesus goes on to describe why he is so concerned with the Pharisees question, for they have, “rejected God’s commands in order to establish their own.”

The Pharisees have “fenced” the Law of God so that they would not sin, but Jesus points out that in their attempt to avoid sin; they have actually disobeyed the Law! He takes point and case to be the law of “Corban”

As Jesus describes, Corban is something that is gifted to God so that it cannot be used for common use. So a son could declare something as “Corban” and his parents would not be able to use that thing. The son however would not be obligated to give it to the Priests either so he could still use it for his purposes.

Jesus quotes the fifth commandment which is, “Honor your father and your mother” and Moses clarifies the command in Exodus 21:17 stating, “whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.” The practice of Corban however undermined the being obedience to ones parents because a child could declare something Corban and deprive his parents the use of the property or possession while he still kept it.

But what does Corban have to do with the washing of hands and ritual purity?

Jesus states that both the necessity of washing hands for cleanliness and the tradition of Corban are examples of how the Pharisees void the word of God by elevating their traditions above the Law. They make unimportant things primary and important things secondary.

It should be said that Jesus does not have a problem with washing hands before you eat. So kids, this verse doesn’t say you don’t have to wash your hands before dinner. (In fact if you used this passage to disobey your parents, you’d be doing the very thing Jesus is condemning.) But what it does say is that washing your hands before a meal does not make you clean or unclean.

### **The Kingdom and Defilement**

Therefore, following this account, Mark records Jesus saying, “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”

Now place yourself in the Pharisees shoes, first he has assaulted the tradition of those you greatly respect, in saying that the traditions they establish destroy the meaning of the Law. That would be bad enough, but Jesus statement is that whatever goes into a person doesn't defile him, it is what comes out!

Jesus explains this to the disciples by saying that what enters the stomach doesn't defile the heart. And Mark leaves an editorial comment that Jesus therefore made all foods clean.

But remember the identity of the Jews. One of the defining aspects of who they were was their observance of the purity regulations. To eat something unclean was to put one outside of assembly and unable to worship God. So in the first encounter Jesus assaults the elders of Israel, but in this account Jesus' statement appears to contradict what the Law says.

Instead of judging the cleanliness of uncleanliness of an individual based upon their diet or outward cleanness, Jesus institutes a new way to discern cleanness for he says, *"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within and they defile a person."*

But can Jesus really overthrow the Old Testament law? This is a question you may not be inclined to ask as a 21<sup>st</sup> century Protestant Christian, but it is something so important in the mind of the first century reader. Can this man really come and overthrow the way God instituted things to be done? Are we to believe the interpretation of the Law from the son of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth?

We have worshipped God for thousands of years with the food and cleanliness laws, and this man wants to overthrow the God ordained way of doing things!

Hopefully you recognize how radical Jesus sounds to the religious leaders. He wants them to abandon everything that they believed about being a Jew and following after the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob to follow him.

But Jesus message is that he is bringing Israel out of Egypt and what it looks like to be clean is more focused upon your heart and not so much upon external behavior. This proclamation of an exodus has radical implications not only for ones standing before God, but it also has implications for WHO is considered part of Israel.

### **The Kingdom and the Subjects**

After leaving from Gennesaret, Jesus goes into the region of Tyre and Sidon attempting to enter quietly. But as we've come accustomed to seeing, as soon as Jesus enters an area, he is recognized.

Mark tells us that immediately a woman heard Jesus coming and she went to him and fell at his feet. This doesn't appear too out of the ordinary, but Mark includes the following: "Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth."

Her request was that Jesus heal her daughter who was demon possessed but Jesus response seems perplexing, *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”*

Jesus is calling this woman a dog! This seems such a difficult and tough passage to deal with but one of the first things we can recognize is that Jesus says that the blessing is first for the “children”, or the Jews. But he does not say it is exclusively to them, but they do receive it first, so there is perhaps some hope for this Gentile woman at some point.

However, what we should notice is this woman’s response to Jesus’ statement. She doesn’t contest Jesus statement, but she even affirms she’s a dog! For she says, *“Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”*

This is a stunning statement of humility and recognition of the need of Jesus Christ in this woman’s life. And the focus of the story isn’t even on Jesus’ healing of her daughter but upon her faith in Christ’s power. The faith of this Gentile woman in the Christ brings her hope and restores the health of her child. What an example of humility and trust in the provision of the Lord! Would you be willing to be considered a dog to partake in a small portion of the benefits of Christ?

This is an amazing example of faith and shows that you cannot trust in yourself. Your strengths, your social standing, your economic situation, or your trust in anything other than Christ. Is it offensive to you that you are a dog before God? I can understand this immediate reaction, but this is not where the Gospel stops, and it is not where the story stops. Jesus heals her daughter because this Gentile woman recognizes that she must rely completely on Christ. My friends, the Gospel calls you to see yourself as a dog! But this is not the end... and we shall get to that shortly, but this ministry to the Gentiles continues in Decapolis, a largely Gentile area.

Upon entering the area the crowds ask Jesus to heal this deaf man. And as Jesus has done numerous times in his ministry, he takes this man to a private place to heal him. Jesus next actions seem very strange (and strikingly unsanitary).

Jesus places his fingers in the man’s ears and spits on his hand and then touches the man’s tongue. Then Jesus looks to heaven and sighs, showing displeasure and identifying with the suffering of this man, just like he has done in a number of his other healings. According to historical records, saliva was customarily used for medicinal purposes, so it appears that Jesus was following a normal medical practice, but this is not what effects the healing of the man. It is Jesus looking up to heaven and his command for the man to be opened that heals him.

And in continuity with other healing accounts in Mark, Jesus commands the man not to tell anyone, but the people cannot remain silent about what Jesus had done for this man. In their amazement at Jesus’ power these Gentiles say, *“He has done all things well. He evens makes the deaf and mute speak.”*

This finally statement neatly ties Chapter 7 together in what the coming of the Kingdom means. For this response is an allusion to Isaiah 35. If you’d like, you can turn to Isaiah 35 which reads:

**1** The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; **2** it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. **3** Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. **4** Say to those who have an anxious heart, Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.

**5** Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; **6** then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; **7** the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. **8** And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. **9** No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. **10** And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Verses 5 and 6 are primarily the ones that are quoted by the Gentile crowd, but one cannot help but see the connection to all of Isaiah 35. God has brought redemption not only to the Land of Israel, but also to the wilderness! God has done what he has promised and he has come in vengeance against the powers of Satan, and has saved his people.

This is consistent with what we saw in Chapter 1 of Mark where Jesus goes out to the wilderness and conquers Satan. His ministry since this time has been demonstrating that he has conquered Satan, and actually begun the transformation of the wilderness into land blessed by God.

This transforming wilderness is shown only as a foretaste however, for the wilderness is a highway to the promised land of Zion for Israel. But can this verse truly apply to you and me?

Wouldn't Isaiah's statement about how the unclean shall not walk on the path rule out Gentiles? Doesn't this whole discussion of the inclusion of the Gentiles destroy the meaning of the Old Testament?

First, this would be a problem IF Jesus did not fulfill the purity laws of the Old Testament. But Jesus did fulfill them, they were not simply abolished. This is why Jesus says "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law, but I have come to fulfill it" (Mat 5 paraphrase). So the ceremonial laws are not done away with, but they are fulfilled in Christ.

The Apostle Paul summarizes what the Gospel of Jesus Christ means for the Law in Ephesians 2:11-22:

*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— **12** remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **15** by abolishing the law of*

*commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, **16** and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. **17** And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. **18** For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. **19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, [\[1\]](#) but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, **21** in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. **22** In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by [\[2\]](#) the Spirit*

So then, what does this mean for us?

We are new in Christ. The Old Testament laws and ordinances that distinguished Jews from Gentiles are no longer followed like they were under the Israel. You were dogs. I was a dog. As Paul says, we were alienated from the promises of God... But how glorious is the power of the Gospel? In Christ we have been made fellow citizens! We have all become children of God in Jesus Christ.

As Gentiles this may not appear to mean much, but by way of application think of what this means functionally in the Church.

No matter race, class, education, sex, we are all one in Christ. There is no longer a Jew and Gentile category. So this means that we should not become so proud of our national identity that we elevate ourselves our or cultural identity above someone else. To make cultural barriers, and particularly in the Church, is to build up the wall of hostility that Christ has torn down.

I do not want to neglect the fact that we live in a largely white population, but I believe that our church should be consciously striving to have more racial diversity. I don't suggest this is easy, it takes work! But it is truly liberating and beautifully pictures what our heavenly worship will be like, when every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship the Lord in unity.

But in closing, I would also like to encourage you that in Christ, you have been included in the people of God. Before, you were cut off. But because of Christ, you have become a child of God! I challenge you to think this week of the incredible blessing that is. We often times have a sense of entitlement to the grace of God, but your response should be like the Gentile women. You should recognize that you do not deserve anything from God, but that in his grace, God offers you peace through his Son. So the call is also to those who are outside of the people of God...

Those who have been made part of the family have only been made so by the grace of God through faith. So you can partake in the promises and blessings of the family of God through Jesus Christ.

For He has led his people out of the bondage of sin, and they are sojourning through the wilderness to the Promised Land which we will enter into on the Last Day.

Therefore, brothers and sisters consider the amazing blessing you have in the peace of Christ. Peace to overcome the power of Satan, racial and cultural barriers, and death.