

August 2, 2009 – PM

Mark 7:31-37

I was recently asked to write a character reference for a friend who was inquiring about a ministry in the United Kingdom. It was an interesting experience. How do you answer the question: What kind of man is he? Well, you need to think through your experience of this person's dealing and actions and words. Are they consistent? Do they follow through on their promises? How do they handle challenges? As I reflected on those questions, I began to compose a picture of this man's character that enabled me to warmly commend him to his potential employers.

I formed a picture of the man's character from his words and deeds. That's how we do it, isn't it?

This evening I want us to turn to Mark 7:31-37 and ask the same question of Jesus. What kind of savior is Jesus Christ?

Before we answer it, however, we need to bow together and ask for the help of God's Spirit as we open the Word. Let us pray,

"We adore You, Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life, together with the Father and the Son, our ever blessed Triune God. You are our Counselor. You are the Other Comforter like Christ whom the Father has sent to the Church to testify of Him. The world neither knows You nor has received You, but we know You because You have come to dwell within our hearts. Take of what is Christ's and make it now to us we pray. Convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. Shine the spotlight of Your grace upon the Scriptures that we might know Christ in fuller clarity. Unstop our ears that we may hear what You would say to your Church, for we ask this now in Christ's precious name, Amen."

What kind of savior is Jesus? What does this passage show us about the character of Christ?

First of all, we learn that Jesus is *a compassionate Savior*.

Jesus has left Tyre and Sidon and moved on to another predominantly Gentile area: the region of the Ten Cities, the Decapolis, by the Sea of Galilee. While He is there, the people bring to Jesus a man who was deaf and, our version says, had an

impediment in his speech. That he is not totally unable to speak means that he was not born deaf but has become deaf as a result of some illness or injury. His loss of hearing has dramatically impaired his ability to communicate verbally. The people beg Jesus to “put His hand on him.” They are looking for healing. In verses 33-35 we have an account of the remarkable lengths to which Jesus goes to help this man. There are four parts to Jesus’ action.

1. The Touch

First, we are told that Jesus separated him from the crowd, presumably to ensure that this man, who was wholly dependent on visual and tactile stimuli, had his whole attention was focused on Christ alone. And then He put His fingers into the man’s ears. Now, there is nothing magical about what Jesus is doing. He is simply ensuring, as best He can, that this poor man understands what is about to happen to Him. Jesus is about to unstop his ears. Then He spits and touches the man’s own tongue. He is going to loosen the man’s tongue. From the mouth of Jesus this man’s healing would proceed.

The classic image of an English speaking tourist visiting a foreign country is of someone speaking very loudly and clearly in English as if volume would suddenly make them intelligible in any language. When this fails, they accompany their shouted baby talk with hand motions. If they are practiced at mime, then maybe, just maybe, they will get their point across. But the locals at least have a good laugh at our trying all the same. But that is what we do when words no longer work. We start acting out what we want, hoping that a little drama will communicate where our language fails. And that is precisely what Jesus is doing here. He pantomimes what He is about to do for this man. He enacts it and dramatizes it so that he will be reassured and helped to trust Christ.

2. The Look

The next thing Jesus did was to look heavenward, verse 34, “Then looking up to heaven He sighed and said...” Jesus wants the man to recognize the source of what is about to take place. He outwardly mimes a posture of prayer. Christ goes to pains to avoid the appearance of magic. He is no wonder-working, pagan magician. For Himself, He makes it clear that He rests on the enabling power of heaven, and with

this upward glance, He instructs the man where he, too, is to look in faith for his deliverance.

And yet in verse 34, as we'll see, instead of asking for the Father to do it, Jesus commands the healing *Himself*. He simply commands it, and it is done. That He points the man heavenward with a glance only to show Himself to be the source of healing directly, indicates the union of the Father with His Son. In Jesus heaven has come down. There is no discrepancy in looking to the Father for healing and finding that healing in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was showing that the God of healing power and delivering grace has stepped onto the scene of history in His own person and work.

3. The Sigh

Then comes the sigh. This is an involuntary expression of sorrow. We meet this same emotional response again and again in Christ's ministry when He is confronted with sin and sickness and death. At the tomb of Lazarus we are told that He is deeply agitated. Later we learn that He weeps over the intrusion and grief that the death of His friend caused. Here Jesus meets a man whose whole life has been turned upside down by the brokenness of a fallen world. The effects of Adam's sin has warped and distorted God's creation and marred the image of God in man. Our Lord looks on this man's situation and His sigh is one not of weariness, but of sadness. This is not the way things ought to be.

4. The Word

Then finally Jesus speaks. "*Ephphatha*" is an Aramaic word that simply means, "Be opened." Jesus commands the opening of his ears and the loosing of the impediment on his speech. One commentator suggests that while Jesus was still saying the word the miracle overtook the man so that he heard the dying syllable of Jesus' own speech. The first sound he hears in however many years of misery was the voice of the Son of God commanding his deliverance.

Now, taking those four actions together, don't we see a wonderful portrait of the compassion of Jesus? What lengths He goes to to communicate with the man! What sorrow pierces His heart as He takes up this man's case! What selflessness He has as

He takes great care to look to heaven and not to Himself! What blessing is freely and unconditionally given to the man at the command of the Savior of Sinners Himself!

How vital it is that we keep this feature of Christ's character in our sights! He abounds in compassion. He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. He is the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief. There is in Jesus a tender insight into our condition, and He is not unmoved by the hurts and sorrows of our hearts. Calvin spoke of "the vehemence of His love towards men, for whose miseries He feels so much compassion." (Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 272) Isn't that a beautiful way of putting it? The vehemence of His love! Jesus abounds in vehement love for you.

There is a great deal of comfort in that simple fact, isn't there? The God whom we adore, the infinite eternal and unchangeable God, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth—this God is, for all His majesty and might, far from aloof and uncaring. The infinite distance between ourselves and His throne is bridged by the infinite compassion of His heart.

In Jesus Christ, the living God has entered into the realities of our predicament and the depths of our sorrows so that we can never say to God, as we may find ourselves saying to others—"you do not understand what I am going through! You don't understand what it's like to be me, to face what I face, to endure what I endure! You don't understand!" Have you ever said that? It might even be true that no one here really understands you. But there is one who knows. There is one who understands. There is one who is characterized by an intelligent, perceptive compassion for hurting sinners—for you.

Jesus commends Himself to us as a compassionate savior. And He offers His compassion to us. He extends His generous, tender, insightful sympathy to us and invites us to find in Him the One who not only understands, but who is able to deliver us from the deepest sources of our misery. He can deliver us from our sin.

Secondly, we learn here that Jesus is *a focused Savior*.

Seeing Jesus heal the man, the crowd is understandably "astonished beyond measure," Mark says. But in verse 36 Jesus "commanded them that they should tell no

one. "Now isn't that odd? Why doesn't Jesus want anyone to know what He has done for this man?"

The answer lies in His *focus*. He has a goal, and He will not get sidetracked from it. He has a task to complete and He is unwilling to be diverted from the accomplishment of it. We've noticed in previous weeks how the crowds followed Him so that neither He nor His disciples could get any rest. He is regularly withdrawing and backing off and moving on so as not to be diverted and overwhelmed by their pressing demands.

Jesus commands the crowd's silence here in 7:36 because He does not want to be mobbed in the same way He has been in other places when huge crowds gathered, as rumors of His power spread. He is focused on His mission and is concerned that it not be diverted or delayed. In Mark 1:38, for example, we see some of that focus early in His ministry. Jesus has attracted great crowds, but He told His disciples on that occasion, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

Jesus has a ministry to fulfill. Early on, it focused on *preaching*. Increasingly, however, as the gospel moves on, it focuses on *the cross*. More and more we find Him preparing the disciples for His death. In chapter 9:2-13 we see Him transfigured on the mountain top and then telling the dumbstruck disciples that they were not to speak of this until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. The cross casts its shadow even over the transfiguration.

Or consider the rapid fire repetition of the same message in 8:31, 9:31, 10: 32-34 , where Jesus predicts His crucifixion again and again. Those three statements are designed to build momentum. It begins to become clear that this whole narrative is moving towards one climactic moment. The momentum those three statements develop quickly takes us Chapter 11, to the beginning of the final week of Jesus' earthly life, as He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, to the acclaim of the crowds who have gathered for the Passover. From there everything moves swiftly towards the great conclusion of Christ's earthly ministry. *This* is why He came. *This* is what He focused the whole course of His life and work.

Jesus is utterly committed, do you see, to saving us; saving us, not ultimately from bodily ailments and earthly troubles, but from the deeper plagues of sin and guilt

that fester in the hearts of all human kind. Jesus sighs over the fallen condition of humanity, in its sin and misery and longs to effect our deliverance. But this He could only do *by the cross*. The liberation of our hearts could not be accomplished as easily as the liberation of this man's tongue. It would take more than a word of divine command to save us from bondage to sin and death and hell. It would take the *cross*. Jesus Christ came, moved with compassion, moved with "the vehemence of love," as Calvin put it, for you and for me, and that love would not be satisfied until it was poured out for us at Calvary.

We've seen that Christ is a *compassionate* Savior. And here's the best index of that compassion and love: Christ is a *focused* Savior, focused on saving us by His own atoning death. Christ loved us so much that He set aside the pursuit of fame and the draw of the crowds. Christ desired your salvation so thoroughly, beloved Christian, that He shunned the vast opportunities for ministry that opened before Him, as crowds begged Him to come and minister among them, and chose instead the path of shame and agony and death. His sigh of compassion and love here in verse 34 would soon give way to a cry of agony and grief from the cross, and He chose it, dear friends, He chose it for you.

Sometimes there is a great temptation to want Christ because we hope He will fix our lives in some way. We hope that He will heal our bodies or the bodies of those we love. We hope He will alleviate our financial crisis or mend our broken relationships. And Christ is certainly able and often pleased to do exactly that. But Jesus' sharp command to the crowd in this passage reveals where Christ's attention was fixed. It was riveted to the salvation of our souls from sin and death and hell. His focus was immovably set on atoning for our sin by His blood on the cross.

If you want Jesus for the collateral benefits you hope a relationship with Him might give, you may, in fact, receive some of those blessings in this life, but you will remain forever a stranger to the true purpose of His coming. Your sin will remain unatoned for, your guilt will not be washed away. You cannot have Jesus if all you want Him for is to fix your life here. Jesus must be the Savior of your soul from the wrath of God, by whose blood you are reconciled to the Lord forever, or He will be your judge at the last day.

So Christ is a *compassionate Savior*, and a *focused Savior*. And finally he is a *sufficient Savior*.

Look, please, at verses 36-37, “Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed *it*. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’”

The more Jesus told them not to say anything the more they spoke about Him. Jesus has moved them deeply. They are all “astonished beyond measure,” our version says. That’s one word in Greek. They are literally “hyper-amazed,” “amazed beyond words.”

In Jesus they are meeting something outside of their experience altogether. They are stunned at what they discover in Him. There is wonder here. And that is a fitting response. Jesus is wonder-full. Jesus ought always to move us to wonder, especially since we know what this crowd does not yet know. Jesus loves us so much that He not only reaches out with compassion to us, but He dies in compassion for us. If we are not gripped with a sense of wonder at Jesus Christ, I question if we know Him at all.

Then notice what they say. “He has done all things well,” they said. And then they use language that picks up on the prophecies of scripture identifying Jesus as the Messiah. The crowd may have been quite unaware that what they said paraphrased scripture, since it is a simple summary of the facts. Nevertheless, their words echo the language of Isaiah 35:5-10, which speaks about a coming day of glory and blessing ushered in by the Messiah: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, And the thirsty land springs of water; In the habitation of jackals, where each lay, *There shall be* grass with reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and a road, And it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, But it *shall be* for others. Whoever walks the road, although a fool, shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, Nor shall *any* ravenous beast go up on it; It shall not be found there. But the redeemed shall walk

there, And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, And come to Zion with singing, With everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Mark does not intend that we read the crowd’s response as if they had all been converted. But he does intend that we find in their words a meaning far deeper than they understood. He is drawing lessons from their statements that he wants his readers to grasp, even if the original speakers did not. And what is the message? It is that Jesus does all things well. There is no lack in Jesus. He is the One in whom the age of messianic fullness dawns. He is the One who will bring the redeemed of the Lord back to Zion with singing. He is the all sufficient Savior.

“Do you see who He is?” Mark asks us. “Do you get a sense of His character and nature?” He is the compassionate Christ, who is filled with such a love that He determines to go with it all the way of the cross for us. He is a focused Savior. And He is finally the all sufficient Savior. He does all things well. There is nothing lacking in His work for us. The mission He is so focused on will not fail. The love that drives Him will find full satisfaction. The blessings of salvation that the redeemed of the Lord will know and rejoice over one day, He will purchase with His blood for us all.

In view of the facts about Him, who could keep quiet about Jesus? Who would not proclaim the more widely what He has done? Jesus is the compassionate, cross focused, completely sufficient Savior. And He is offered to us all tonight in the gospel.

Amen.