

Jesus Heals A Deaf-Mute Man (Be Opened!)

Mark 7:31-37

Key Verse: 7:34-35

by Kevin Albright

“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.”

In the previous passage, Jesus granted the request of a Greek woman and drove the demon out of her daughter. We learned from this woman that when we cry out to Jesus in humble faith, he will grant our request. That incident took place in Tyre, a coastal port city on the Mediterranean Sea. It was Gentile territory. As this passage opens, Jesus leaves Tyre, goes north through Sidon, down to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. A deaf and mute man is brought to Jesus and Jesus heals him saying, “Be opened!” May Jesus open our ears to his word and loosen our tongues to speak it.

First, they came to Jesus. The Decapolis was Gentile territory. Why did Jesus go there? There are several biblically sound reasons. Jesus wanted to avoid the escalating confrontation with the Pharisees by staying in Gentile territory a little longer. Jesus wanted more quiet time with his disciples, which had been averted on several occasions to meet the demands of others. There is another possible reason Jesus went to the Decapolis. The last time Jesus was there was when he told the healed Gerasene man, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” It may be that Jesus wanted to check up on this man and the people he had evangelized.

You may recall that Jesus was not well-received there during his previous visit. The townspeople had seen the crazy man healed and the huge herd of pigs drowned in the lake. They were afraid and asked Jesus to leave their region. So he did. Here we can learn that where Jesus is not welcome, he will leave. But he might come back later for another try. The Bible says, “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2Pe 3:9) Blessed is the man and the community that welcomes Jesus. Jesus invites us saying, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” (Rev 3:20) You like an invitation to a celebration party, right? God has given us many wonderful invitations in his word. For example, Jesus also said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Mt 11:28) Again, in Isaiah 55 (1-3a) God beckons, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.” Now we are preparing summer Bible conferences. Why do we have these events? Just listen to the titles: “Come to

Jesus and Rest,” “God’s Great Hope For Everyone,” “For God So Loved the World,” and, “Following Jesus.” These conferences are to help us to welcome Jesus into our hearts and lives. Have you done that—welcomed Jesus into your heart and life? If you have not, what are you waiting for? “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Heb 4:7; Ps 95:7) Now is the day of salvation (2Co 6:2). “The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” (Mk 1:15) If you have welcomed Jesus into your heart and life, please welcome him newly through the summer Bible conference. Not only that, please invite someone to come with you.

Remember that the Decapolis people had asked Jesus to leave their region. When he came back, how did they react? Look at verse 32. “There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.” Evidently, these people had changed in two ways. For one, they welcomed Jesus, instead of driving him away. They came to Jesus asking for help. They believed that Jesus had power to heal the sick. Perhaps they learned this from the news spreading all over. Also, many must have heard the Gerasene man’s testimony how Jesus had delivered him from the legion of demons. Sometimes a Christian’s testimony causes an unbeliever to feel threatened and uneasy and the unbeliever says to the Christian, “Get away from me, you Jesus freak!” or “That may be good for you, but it’s not for me.” They are fearful of losing ungodly habits. They are proud, thinking they don’t need to change. But sometimes, honest people see the wonderful change Jesus has made in a person’s life and they are moved to come to Jesus and even to bring someone in need to Jesus. We all know of family and friends who have been influenced to come to Jesus through another person’s testimony or labor of love in Christ. This is how Christianity has spread, from the time of Jesus to now: through the personal testimony and love of those changed by the grace of Jesus Christ. Personally, I cannot forget one person’s testimony. I was a church-goer in high school. But I didn’t know Christ personally. I went to church because I thought it was the right thing to do and made me a better person. I knew a girl whom it was rumored had sinned with one boy. The boy boasted about it. But the girl was heartbroken and repentant. She testified to me, “Jesus Christ forgave me.” I could see she had no intention of repeating her sin. No one had ever said that to me, sharing a personal testimony of faith in Christ and his forgiveness. It blew me away. I did not become a believer on the spot, but these words were definitely a push in the right direction. It was about a year later, in college and through UBF ministry, that I trusted Jesus for my forgiveness, salvation and hope. I also shared my newfound joy with this friend, who had witnessed her faith to me. If you are a believer in Christ, you have the privilege and obligation to share this good news with others, especially with those whom you know and see are in need of it.

Another way these people had changed was that they cared for one needy soul. Before, they seemed concerned about pigs and their economy more than one man’s soul. But now they brought their deaf-mute friend to Jesus. We see how one person’s testimony can influence many people for good and bring them to Jesus. The Samaritan woman is another example of this. Her townspeople said to her, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.” (Jn 4:42) A Christian’s testimony is for the sake of bringing others to Jesus to see and hear for themselves.

Second, a deaf and mute man. Let's come back to the Bible story. Who did they bring to Jesus? A man who could not hear and who could hardly talk. Of course, a deaf person cannot speak well, for he cannot hear himself speaking. We don't know how he had become deaf. It was not likely from his birth for he could speak somewhat. Perhaps a loud sound had damaged his ears or an ear infection and poor medicine had ruined his sense of hearing. I can only imagine what it would be like to be deaf and mute. Obviously, hearing and speaking are essential in communication with others. Perhaps missionaries who don't speak the native language can relate better to the deaf and mute man. A deaf man today could not use the telephone or listen to the radio. Even television or movies without captions would be worthless. This man could not hear others talking, birds chirping, dogs barking, music playing, children singing or his mother calling him. Most people could not understand what he wanted to say, except a few people who understood sign language. Even if he could write everything he wanted to say, it would greatly slow and limit his communication to literate people. He lived in a silent, lonely, isolated world.

Whoever has been blessed with the gift of hearing and speech must not take it for granted. We must thank God for the ability to hear and speak. Even more importantly, we must use our gift of hearing and speech for the glory of God. If a man doesn't use his ears or mouth for the glory of God, then he is spiritually deaf or mute. If we cannot hear what God is saying to us through his word, then we are spiritually deaf. Jesus often said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (4:9,23) If a man does not want to hear the word of God, then he is spiritually deaf. Sometimes a person thinks he has heard it all before. His pride makes him spiritually deaf. The people of Athens were like this. When they heard Paul preaching some asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" They also said, "You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." Luke tells us, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." (Ac 17:18-21) Paul warned in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." Today so many people please their itching ears for hours and hours through television, music and the internet. Consider this: how many hours daily or weekly do you watch TV, listen to the radio or an MP3, or surf or chat on the internet? Now compare: how many hours do you spend in God's word and prayer? God is speaking to us through his word. Can you hear him?

Cain was spiritually deaf. When Cain was angry, God tried to counsel him. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (Ge 4:6-7) But Cain did not listen to God's counsel and warning. He listened to his anger and became a miserable soul and murdered his own brother. Saul was spiritually deaf. God ordered him to fight the Amalekites and totally destroy them. Saul thought he had a better idea: to spare their king and the best of their sheep and cattle. When Saul listened to his own idea, rather than God's command, God rejected him as king. One who does not listen to God's word and obey it is spiritually deaf.

What does it mean to be spiritually mute? To be spiritually mute is to not speak up for God and the truth when we have opportunity or obligation to do so. In our country we have the freedom of speech. We can share our faith in Christ without any threat of being arrested. This is not true in communist or Muslim nations. Even though we have this freedom of speech, in our human nature we are much more comfortable to speak about what is politically correct, like sports or the weather, since these are not offensive to people. Fear of rejection can rob a man of speech and make him silent. Remember Peter on the night of Jesus' arrest? He was spiritually mute. He could not speak up for Jesus. Rather he lied, saying he didn't even know Jesus. Later, after Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Christ, they were threatened by those in authority not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Peter replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Ac 4:19-20) Spiritually mute Peter became a bold and joyful preacher of the gospel of Christ. Later he wrote, "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God." (1Pe 4:11) He also wrote, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1Pe 3:15-16) Some spiritual mutes are blabbermouths to gossip or criticize. Paul wrote, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (Eph 4:29) If we only talk about worldly things, then we are spiritually mute. If we have no idea what to say or pray, we are spiritually mute. When we come to Jesus and receive the word of God. Then we know what to say and how to pray. We can speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) and plant faith and love for God in others.

Third, Jesus' loving touch and powerful word. How did Jesus help this man? Look at verses 33-34. "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!')." Jesus first took the deaf-mute man away from the crowd. In this way, Jesus showed personal attention and love to this man. He drew him away from the hustle and bustle of the crowd. Jesus wanted the man's full attention. Next, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then Jesus' spit and touched the man's tongue. Perhaps Jesus did these things since they were very visible and the man could not hear. Jesus wanted the man to know what he was doing and to plant faith in him. Jesus looked up to heaven, showing his reliance on God, and said with a deep sigh, "Ephphatha!" (which in Aramaic means, "Be opened!"). Though the man could not hear, he could surely read Jesus' lips, especially the word, "Ephphatha!"

What happened? At Jesus' words, "Be opened!", the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. At the beginning of creation God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Ge 1:3). When Jesus commanded, "Be opened!", the man's ears were opened, just as Jesus commanded and willed it. When Jesus said to Jairus' 12-year old daughter, who was lying dead on her bed, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!", immediately the girl stood up and walked around (5:41). When Jesus said to the stormy sea, "Quiet! Be still!", the wind died

down and it was completely calm (4:39). There is almighty power in the word of Jesus. Jesus' word is the living and active word of God. Jesus' word can heal and save us.

Through Jesus' loving touch and powerful word, the man could hear and speak plainly. Then a whole new world opened up to this man; he had a rich new life full of sounds and the ability to communicate his thoughts. Now he could speak and sing praises to God. He could pray audibly. And he could testify to the wonderful grace of Jesus. This is how we must use our mouths for the glory of God. Jesus can open our spiritual ears. We must come to Jesus and receive his healing touch and living word. Jesus can loosen our tongues to speak praises to God. When we have the word of God and the Holy Spirit, we can speak the living word of God. We can know what to pray. We can testify to others of Jesus' saving grace, love and power.

At the end of this short story, Jesus commanded the people there not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. They were spiritually deaf since they acted like they didn't hear Jesus. Isn't it hard to keep good news a secret? People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Their words echoed the words of the prophet Isaiah, written 700 years earlier: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." (Isa 35:5-6) Jesus is the mighty God who can give hearing to the deaf and speech to the mute. Jesus is the giver of abundant life. Let's come to Jesus and have our ears opened to the word of God and our tongues loosened to speak it. Let's bring others to Jesus that they too may have their ears opened and their tongues loosened.