

Jesus Changes Needy People

How Christ uses his power to change needy lives, and how we are to live in light of being changed

Introduction

Christ is truly a great Savior! He has met us in our time of need, and has saved us, helped us, kept us, and loved us. Because of that we are changed people – we will never be the same! And now, in light of who Christ is and in response to what he has done, we gather as a people of God to listen to the Word of God...so turn to Mark 7 in your Bibles. Our goal is to encourage each other to hold on to Christ. Maybe you have lost sight of him this week. Maybe your eyes have drooped and your legs have given out. Maybe you have been tempted to call it quits. How amazing is the grace of God that he has brought you to this place at this time, surrounded by brothers and sisters, where your eyes can be lifted to see Christ more clearly and you can be exhorted to run to him in your time of need!

But I wonder if we're really that comfortable with talking about needs. I wonder if we've adopted an unwritten social standard that distinguishes between clean needs and messy needs: clean needs are those that we'd feel comfortable with other people knowing about, those that we can share and still maintain some level of respectability and control; "I'm really okay, but I could use a little help or prayer if you want. No big deal." Messy needs, on the other hand, are those that we don't like to share with others. They say, "I'm not okay." When we have messy needs, we do our best to ignore or deny them to ourselves. And when it comes to those unfortunate souls who reveal those messy needs to the public, whether by choice or not, we don't quite know how to deal with them. We feel helpless. We get awkward. We create distance. We leave them to the experts. And when we can't get away from those needs, we respond as if our rights are being encroached upon. Let me give you an example:

If a husband were to say to his wife, "Honey, you are so *needy!*", what would he be communicating? He would be saying this: "Honey, when we got married, I signed up for a certain level of needs-meeting, a certain amount. Right now, your neediness is going above and beyond what I am prepared to deal with...its past acceptable limits. So I am protesting the fact

that you just can't get it done yourself, you can't just suck it up, you can't make it on your own...you need to stop relying on me so much. You are so *needy*." Its not a compliment, is it? We look at neediness as a weakness, and weaknesses are to be eradicated. Thus, when we come face to face with neediness in our lives or in the lives of others, we get uncomfortable, because we don't like to identify ourselves as needy.

But here's the problem: *Christ has eyes only for needy people*. The book of Mark presents Jesus as having all authority, all the power of God, and yet he doesn't use his authority like the emperors and kings of the day—to keep people down and subjected. Time and time again, Mark reveals Jesus using his power to connect with and minister to people who were needy and recognized their need. He wasn't interested in those who had it together. He wasn't interested in those who were standing tall and confident in their own strength and power. He ministered to those people who were down and out, physically deformed, sick, outcasts, marginalized, unconnected, poor... those who were helpless without Jesus.

With our time together today, I have two goals: First, by looking at the story of Jesus healing the deaf and mute man, I want to remind us of how Christ ministers to and changes people. As we look at that account, we'll come face to face with how he ministers to us and changes us in the Gospel. Second, I want to ask and answer the question: "In light of how Christ has changed you, how should you minister to those people around you who are in need?"

Let's read the text.

From this text, I want to observe 4 ways that Christ uses his power to change the life of this deaf and mute man. And since we believe that Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we'll see that, if you are a child of God, Christ has ministered to you in these same four ways:

1. **Jesus demolishes barriers of separation.** [7:31-32a]
2. **Jesus disregards personal comfort zones.** [7:32-33]
3. **Jesus connects in custom-tailored ways.** [7:33-34]
4. **Jesus breaks the chains of captivity.** [7:35-37]

1. Jesus demolishes barriers of separation.

[7:31-32a]

“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...”

Back at the beginning of chapter 7, the Pharisees notice that some of the disciples didn't wash their hands before eating. [By the way, this would be the best passage to go to if you want to make a case to your mom for why you don't need to wash your hands before dinner, especially when we see Jesus' reply.] The Pharisees didn't like that they were eating with unclean hands, but not for the same reason that your mom doesn't like it. The Pharisees had made hand-washing a part of their religious tradition. It expressed one main principle: we [the Jews] are to be separate from them [the Gentiles]. Can you see the potency of this tradition? We wash our hands because they come into contact with dirt and bacteria. They washed their hands because they came into contact with Gentiles. Not the most peacemaking gesture out there.

Notice that Jesus isn't a big fan of their traditions. He calls them hypocrites. He told them that their hearts were far from God. Then he proceeded to redefine what is clean and unclean: its not what is outside of you that can make you unclean, but it is what is inside of you. You might say, “Ben, he's talking about food here. What does this have to do with people?” This is where geography and story placement becomes important. Notice where Jesus goes immediately following this interchange: to Tyre and Sidon. Notice who he ministers to: a Syrophenician woman – a Gentile. After that, we're into our story, and notice where he is: Decapolis, a Gentile region. And it follows, then, that the deaf and mute man is a Gentile. These are the ones who were like dirt to be washed off from Jewish hands. In other words, there was a huge barrier that separated the Jews from the Gentiles. Jesus jumped right over that wall to minister to and heal these needy Gentiles.

Jesus' ministry can never be understood apart from the cross. When Jesus scaled that wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, he was saying, “walls of any kind cannot keep me from people in need.” At the cross, then, Jesus didn't just scale the wall, he demolished it. Do you know that he did that for you? Do you know that you were separated from him?

“...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. But

*now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has **broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility** 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, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (Eph. 2:12-16)*

If we forget that we were helplessly separated from God, and that we have an ongoing need for Christ to bring us near to him, we will start building heart barriers of separation between us and people that are different than us. Can you see any of them in your life? Be warned: they're often hard to spot. They're subtle. Here's a diagnostic question to help you spot heart barriers: "Do I focus more on what divides us than on how Christ unites us? If they are not a Christian, do I spend more time washing my hands to get rid of their influence, or do I minister to them in their neediness to mirror Christ's work in my life? Am I introducing them to Christ, who can demolish their heart barrier of separation and bring them to God?"

2. Jesus disregards personal comfort zones.

[7:32-33]

“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.”

Personal space is important, wouldn't you agree? Respect the 2-foot rule, please. Don't get *too* close. I'm not comfortable. What's interesting is that the more we're comfortable with a person, the closer we allow them and the smaller that personal space becomes. The less we're comfortable with a person, for whatever reason, the larger that "comfort zone" expands. We create a bigger buffer. Remember, messy needs make us uncomfortable and awkward, so our typical response to neediness is to play the comfort zone card: that's out of my comfort zone. I don't know how to handle it. I'm not comfortable with dealing with that. But Jesus does the complete opposite here. Notice that he has no concept of respecting personal space, either his or the deaf/mute man! He sticks his fingers into his ears. He spits. He touches the man's tongue. Now I know that many of you are probably reaching for your hand sanitizer without even knowing it, but hang with me. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Respecting or protecting the personal space isn't on my radar. Keeping my fingers free of ear gunk isn't even on my radar. Changing your life is."

Thank God that Jesus didn't let his own comfort zone stop him from reaching out to us. You see, we are not that lovable. We're not that easy to deal with. We have problems that make us hard to be around. Can you imagine if Christ would have played the comfort zone card on us? If he would have stayed in heaven and said, "I'm not too comfortable with taking on human flesh. It stinks." But..."The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)" He "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Phil. 2:7)" The message of the Gospel is that Christ stepped out of the riches and comfort of his home and reached out to you in your messy, uncomfortable, hard-to-love home.

How do we respond? We step out of our comfort zones. We stop playing that card. Maybe we're uncomfortable because we don't know what to do. The need seems too great, too complex. Trust God, follow Christ's example, and step out. Maybe you're uncomfortable because ministering in a certain situation could potentially cause you to experience suffering or heartache. Look to Christ, who "suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:21)"

3. Jesus connects in custom-tailored ways.

[7:33-34]

"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.'"

Why did Jesus go through all these motions to heal this guy? Did he need to? It feels a little bit like a show, or a "magic man" routine. Couldn't he simply have said "be opened" and be done with it? Yes, he could have. He is God, and his word is all-powerful. Then why the routine? I believe it was to connect with the man in a way that was profoundly unique to his need. Consider how much you rely on your hearing and speaking to function. If they were to be taken away from you, what would happen? It would be hard, almost impossible, to connect with other people. Your sense of community and belonging would be seriously attacked. In a sense, you would be set adrift, doomed to float on a sea of isolation. Imagine, then, a man walks up to you and pulls you aside from the crowd. He steps into your world. He gets in your face and he sticks his fingers in your ears – the ears that don't work, that isolate you from the world of chirping birds,

beautiful music, crying babies, comforting voices. He then touches your tongue – the tongue that doesn't work right, that can't communicate words of joy, anger, hope, love. He has seen you, and he has communicated to you in a way that overcomes your disability. He has connected with you. And then he looks to the sky, and sighs – a sigh that communicates passion, empathy, dismay that in this fallen world things like ears and tongues are broken – and then he utters two words (one in Aramaic): be opened.

Do you see how profoundly Christ connected with him? This man wasn't just a number, or a face in the crowd. Jesus saw him, knew him, overcame his communication barriers, and healed him. This is how Jesus sees you as well. You are not nameless filler. You're not an extra on the set. He knows you, and his reaching out to you in salvation was a profoundly personal work. Each of you have your own story, a set of circumstances in which Christ reached out to you and broke through. It is a different story than mine, and its different than the person next to you. God changes individual lives in unique, powerful, transformative ways.

If we lose sight of this aspect of the Gospel, that Christ loved *you* and saved *you*, then we will begin to move away from one-on-one, in-the-trenches ministry and focus more on methods and programs. In this approach, the response to neediness is to get the person or people into the right program, or introduce them to the right method. I'm sure Jesus could have gathered up a bunch of needy, sick, deformed, people, and just pronounced one word of healing to cover them all – sort of a batch process. But he didn't. And we shouldn't approach neediness that way either. Learn to listen well. Learn to really see. Be creative in overcoming communication barriers. Minister to them the way Christ ministered to you and is still ministering to you.

4. Jesus breaks the chains of captivity.

[7:35-37]

“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.’”

The word “released”, in the Greek language, has the idea of being released from captivity. The Gospel writer of Mark doesn't waste words, and he chose this one intentionally. This man's

tongue was portrayed as being bound with chains, and Jesus' healing work was a breaking of those chains. He set this man's tongue free. When Jesus moves into someone's life, in their neediness, he can do so much more than offer a kind word or make them a meal. He can free them. He can restore them. But Jesus doesn't want to be known as just a restorer of ears and an emancipator of tongues. That's why I think he charged the crowd to be silent: they would simply contribute to his reputation as a miracle-worker, and that falls far short of the full reality. But interestingly, it seems as if the crowd catches a whiff of who Jesus really is: they say, "He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute speak." The word that's translated as mute is only used one other time in the whole Bible. That doesn't always mean there's a connection, but here, I think there is. Turn to Isaiah 35. In the previous chapters, God's judgment has been declared on many nations, including Israel. In chapter 35, however, the themes shifts from judgment to joy, joy that comes from God showing up:

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; 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.** Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 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.**' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the **ears of the deaf unstopped**; then shall the lame man leap like the deer, and **the tongue of the mute sing for joy...** (Is. 35:1-6a)"

When Jesus healed this deaf and mute man, he was sending a message: "You are seeing the glory of the LORD. I am the LORD, and I have come to save you."

When you realize that Christ freed you from chains that couldn't be broken by any human weapon, there is only one way to respond, and that is the way the crowd responded: "He has done all things well." Sometimes, though, when I am faced with my own neediness or the neediness of others, I am tempted to believe that the problem is too big or complex for God to handle. I am cowed by the greatness of the need, and I grow silent and stumped. This is understandable, because needs can be great. But this response must be called what it is: wicked and unbelieving. For God is greater, and he has come to save. He has come to free us from our sins. And if that is true, and if we really believe that, then we will turn to Christ. We will take people to Christ.

CONCLUSION

The beauty and power of the gospel is that Christ, who was rich in every conceivable way, came to us, who were poverty-stricken to the depths of our soul, and he became poor so that we might become rich. You see, if you are a Christian, part of being converted is coming to the point where you recognize your need for Christ. If you haven't been there, then you are not a Christian. If you simply added Christ to your previously standing structure, then you've simply added more religion to your rebellion against God. But if you've recognized that your foundation is corrupted and utterly ruined, and you've built your life on Christ, then you have been saved.

All I've tried to communicate today is this: don't move on from the Gospel message. We were needy then, we still are. We need the gospel today more than ever. We need to bring it to bear on every part of our lives, right here and right now. If we came to Christ in need and utterly dependent on Christ, then that should impact how we continue to come to Christ now. And if we are needy people coming to Christ for daily help, then that should impact how we respond to needy people around us, both of the clean and messy variety. So, in light of who Christ is, and in response to what he's done, I urge you:

1. **Demolish heart barriers of separation.**

Have you been more about the business of sequestering yourself from people who you perceive as too different, too messy, too sinful, too needy? Ask God to reveal to you the sinful heart barriers that you've built to separate you from other people. Confess them as sin, and repent by the grace of God. Christ has torn down the barriers – God forbid that we should ever build them back up.

2. **Move out of personal comfort zones.**

Who in your life makes you uncomfortable? Purpose, by God's grace, to step out and be awkward for the Lord. He will use you in your awkwardness to minister to someone in their messiness. The point is not merely to do uncomfortable things. The point is that Jesus is outside the comfort zone, ministering to people outside the comfort zone. Will we follow him there?

3. **Connect with people in custom-tailored ways.**

Parents, you are presented daily with the opportunity to minister to the neediest of the needy: your children. Do you know them? Do you really see them and minister to them uniquely? Or do you cart them off to AWANA and Sunday School and see that as the answer to their needs? Change your thinking. We all have opportunities every day to interact with other people, who, whether we know it or not, are pretty messy and in need of Christ. By all means, invite them to church or an evangelistic event, but make your first move be to take them out for coffee and listen well to their story. Get to know them. Connect with them personally the same way Christ connected with you.

4. Announce that salvation can be found in Jesus.

Its easy to proclaim here in this building, but do you proclaim it at the break table? Do you preach it at your neighbor's fence? Do you live it out by how you wade into the deep waters of someone's messy, needy life? *"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come... **He will come and save you.**'"*

Let's pray.