

The Unpleasant Ways God Uses To Sanctify Us

Mark 7:31-37

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The ordinary means of grace that God uses to grow us in the likeness of our blessed Savior, Jesus Christ, are the Word of God, prayer, and the sacraments. Thank God for these means of grace. We are transformed by the power of God as we behold the Lord Jesus in His Word and as we call upon Him in prayer to gradually shape us and mold us into the likeness of Jesus, as the potter does with the clay. We cannot expect to grow as a Christian if we do not spend time daily in God's Word and in prayer, communing with Him and He with us.

But God sanctifies and grows us not only while we are comfortably sitting in our rooms reading His Word and praying unto Him, He also sanctifies and grows us by very unpleasant and uncomfortable situations/people. He sanctifies us by means of trials, afflictions, heartaches, and sorrow. Most of us would prefer being sanctified by simply the Word, prayer, and the sacraments, but the Lord takes us out of our comfortable quiet rooms to be molded into Christ's image in all manner of situations we would not choose for ourselves. The school of Christ wherein Jesus teaches us is not just at our desk with His Word before us, but continues throughout the day in our marriages and families, at work, at the doctor's office and hospital, waiting in line at the store, in natural catastrophes, in national disasters, and in persecution for our faith in Jesus Christ. In every relationship and in every situation (even the most unpleasant ones), the Lord is at work to conform us to our blessed Savior.

That is what we see from our text today. Let us consider the following main points: (1) The Need of This Man (Mark 7:31-32a); (2) The Unpleasant Means Used by Jesus to Heal This Man (Mark 7:32b-35); (3) The Effect of This Miracle upon the Witnesses (Mark 7:36-37).

I. The Need of This Man (Mark 7:31-32a).

A. As our text begins, the Lord Jesus is leaving the area of Tyre and Sidon in the far north of Israel and is returning to the area of Decapolis on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. He is met by a great multitude of people, many among whom were very ill (according to Matthew 15:30). Now out of all the sick healed on that occasion, one healing is separated from all the rest. It is the healing of the man we find here in Mark 7:31-37. There must have been something about this healing that set it apart from the rest in the mind of the Holy Spirit. What made this healing so unique from all the others on that occasion? Let us see.

B. There was brought to Jesus a certain man who could neither hear nor speak (at least with no clear articulation of speech). This man was isolated from the world of communication to a very great extent due to his disabilities.

1. First, we learn that the man was deaf. He could not hear the voices of his wife or children if he was married. He could not hear the rain fall against the house as he fell asleep at night, nor the chirping voices of the birds in the trees. He could not hear the Word of God read or preached. He could not sing the psalms with God's people. Twenty-four hours each day there was only silence— complete and total silence.

2. There was a second disability noted here: a speech impediment. The two Greek words joined together here mean "difficulty" and "speak". This probably indicates that he was not deaf from birth. He apparently was able to articulate some words or some sounds, but only with great difficulty due to some problem with his tongue or with that part of the brain that controls speech. His inability to communicate by speech was apparently so significant that he was still classified in the same category as a mute who could not speak (according to Mark 7:37).

3. Here was one who for the most part was cut off from meaningful communication with those whom he loved and from the corporate worship of God with God's people? We should ever be thankful to the Lord for His mercy in granting to us the gift of hearing and speaking? What would our world be like without these gifts? There are many in the world who do not enjoy these gifts (like this poor man).

4. Remember the word of the Lord to Moses in Exodus 4:11. And why has the Lord made people deaf and mute? For His own holy and wise purposes (as with the man who was born blind in John 9:1-3). A disability is not just something to pity, but it is always an opportunity to serve. All disabilities, illnesses, and diseases are God's opportunities placed in our path to love, help, and serve others in the name of Christ.

5. We may complain to the Lord, "What am I supposed to be doing in the church? What is my niche and place of service in the church?" Dear ones, wherever there is a disability, an illness, or a disease, there is God's appointed opportunity for you to serve, to encourage, to pray for, and to help. When we serve even the least of Christ's brothers or sisters, Jesus said we serve Him (Matthew 25:40). Even a cup of cold water offered to one because he/she is a disciple of Jesus Christ will be rewarded (Matthew 10:42). We are thankful for our deacon, but we shouldn't need a deacon (or a program) to show the love of Jesus to those in need. When we are consumed with serving, we will see we have much for which to be thankful and little about which to complain.

II. The Unpleasant Means Used by Jesus to Heal This Man (Mark 7:32b-35).

A. When this needy man was presented to Jesus to be healed (perhaps by his family or friends), the text states, "and they beseech him to put his hand upon him" (Mark 7:32b). But this the Lord does not do—He does not lay His hand upon him to heal him. Perhaps these family members or friends associated Christ's power to heal with the laying on of hands? Perhaps they were looking to one particular way in which Jesus must heal the man—the laying on of hands.

1. There was nothing wrong with the laying on of hands in either the ministry of Jesus or in the ministry of the apostles (many times Jesus and the apostles did so). But when the power of Jesus became so identified with the laying on of hands, rather than with Jesus Himself being the source of that power, laying on of hands became superstitious.

2. And just about any approved means for our growth in Christ can become a superstitious idol if we forget who is the one and only object of our faith, of our prayers, of our worship, of our love, of our hope, of our obedience, of our knowledge, and of our life.

3. Sometimes we are deaf to the voice of Christ because it does not come through the means which we approve: as when the voice of Christ comes to us through our wives, or through our husbands, or through our children, or through our parents, or through a brother or sister in the church, or through the pastor or an elder, or through an affliction or trial. We would rather have the voice of Christ come through a means of which we approve, and at the time and place that we choose. Let us not be so bold as to dictate to God by what means He will grow us.

B. Look with me at the unpleasant means Jesus employed in order to teach us to look in faith to Him and not to the means He appoints.

1. First, Jesus takes this needy man away from the crowd (Mark 7:33). Why? That the eye of faith might be focused upon Christ alone without the distraction and excitement of the multitudes. It is Christ in all His power, in all His mercy, in all His Deity in whom one is to believe. It is not those who have already been healed to whom this man is to look in faith, but to Jesus alone. There are many distractions that take our eye of faith off of the Lord Jesus (Isaiah 45:22).

2. Next, Jesus used unpleasant and uncomfortable means to heal this man. He put His fingers into each of the man's ears. Now as if that wasn't strange enough, the Lord spits upon His finger and touches the tongue of the man. On another occasion, Jesus spat into the eye of a blind man (Mark 8:23).

3. Why did Jesus use these unpleasant means to heal this man? Could He not have just spoken the word or put His hand upon the man? Of course, He could have done so. But that's the very lesson He intended to teach—that He is able to use whatever means He ordains to bring healing, blessing, sanctification, and growth in our lives, in our marriages, in church, or in our nation. He is even able to use what appears to be the most foolish means or the most unpleasant means to bring us to Christ, to heal us of our spiritual infirmities, and to grow us in His grace and knowledge.

a. Spitting in the Scripture was a sign of shame (Numbers 12:14; Deuteronomy 25:9). Likewise, it is often through means and circumstances in our lives that we find shameful and unpleasant (circumstances that we would never have chosen for ourselves) through which the Lord heals us, sanctifies us, grows us, brings reformation to our family, church, and nation) that He might be glorified.

b. Dear ones, think of the shameful and contemptible spitting the Lord of glory endured not for His own sin, but for sinners like you and me (Matthew 26:67—during the unjust trial before Caiaphas; Matthew 27:28-31—after the unjust trial before Pilate). Jesus was treated as someone cursed and contemptible because He bore our sin and shame. How do we respond when we are spat upon for following Jesus in obedience to His commands? With vengeance? With retaliation? Or by speaking the truth in love? Do we see that spitting upon us as a means to grow us in Christ even when we seek justice?

4. Jesus declared with divine authority, "Be opened." And the man could hear immediately and speak plainly. He was healed—not because of the means Christ employed, but because of who Jesus is in all His glory and power. That's the point. It's Jesus that heals—not the means He uses. Let us not despise the means He uses, but rather thank Him for them.

III. The Effect upon the Witnesses (Mark 7:36-37).

A. Jesus charges the one healed not to tell any man (at least for the present time). This was no doubt due to the hostility of the Pharisees and Sadducees toward Christ—a hostility which would pursue Him eventually to His death.

B. He hath done all things well (Mark 7:37)—even when He heals/sanctifies by unpleasant means.

1. Let us not presume to tell God how and under what circumstances we will be healed, or we will be blessed, or we will be sanctified and bear fruit. He may take us through very unpleasant circumstances in order that our faith may be placed in Him and in Him alone, rather than in people or in circumstances with which we are most comfortable. The Lord may even take us through circumstances that we find to be contemptible, distasteful, and despised in order that we might be conformed to Christ's image. Let us not be like Naaman, the Syrian captain (2 Kings 5), who would not be healed of his leprosy by washing himself in the dirty, muddy Jordan River. Let us endure hardships and trials in our lives, our marriages/families, church, and nation looking to Jesus to use even unpleasant circumstances (even being spat upon for Christ) to sanctify us (Genesis 50:20).

2. That godly, young martyr and minister of Jesus Christ, James Renwick (*Life and Letters of James Renwick*, p. 170), likewise reminds us how the Lord sanctifies us.

Rejoice in your light affliction which is but for a moment. Count your antagonists your greatest friends, for what are they doing by all the storms they raise against you, but contributing to the mass of your glory [in being conformed to Christ's image—GLP]? O fear them not, but keep your Captain-general [Jesus Christ—GLP] upon your right hand, and then cry to them to shoot to their fill.

How can we not but grow in Christ when this is how we receive the most unpleasant and painful trials that God brings into our lives? We can only do this in His grace/strength (2 Corinthians 12:9).

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