

**JAMES 2:1-17 (p. 978)**

**SEPTEMBER 9, 2018**

**MARK 7:24-37 (p. 819)**

**BLAINE**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

In the words of Jesus, “Ephphatha”! “Be opened!” Open our ears and our hearts, Father. Open our eyes and our minds. And especially Lord, open our spirits to your Spirit, as we study together today. We ask this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.

**“PLAYING FAVORITES”**

Way down in Brazil, just outside the city of Rio de Janeiro, on the summit of a 2,300-foot mountain called Corcovado, stands a huge statue of Jesus with outstretched arms. Maybe you’ve seen it, in pictures or in movies? It’s pretty famous really. It’s made entirely out of reinforced soapstone and concrete. It weighs over 635 metric tons, and stands one hundred and twenty-five feet tall on top of a pedestal. The arms span ninety-two feet. The statue is known as “Christ the Redeemer”, and tourists come from all over the world to see it! It’s very impressive really! Awe inspiring! And ironically, something that would never be allowed to remain here in the politically correct, yet supposedly religiously-free, United States of America!

Just a ways out from the base of mountain, down along the coast, are some of the most luxurious homes and ocean-front condominiums the world has ever seen! The uber-wealthy and socially-elite live here, or winter here—people with more money than they could ever possibly spend in their entire life!

What's interesting, though, is that about halfway between the two—halfway between the worldly affluence along the ocean, and the mountain top where Jesus stands—there is a shanty town of hovels, a ghetto really, inhabited by families drowning in poverty! Their very existence is eked out in a day-to-day struggle just to survive! The only goal for most of them, is to somehow get themselves and their families through one more day!

The wealthy enjoy the coastal breezes. They swim and boat, and bask in the sun. And the Tourists stream in from all over the world to do the very same thing—to enjoy the music and Carnival, to journey up the mountain to see the giant statue of Jesus, and maybe worship in the shadow of His Presence! The problem is, in order for them to do so—to get from the beach, up to the summit—they have to travel through the slums!

One of my roommates in seminary did that! He went to Brazil as part of a cross-cultural experience, and shared with me what it was like. On one walk through those filth-ridden streets he ran into what was obviously a local woman. So, he asked her, in his broken Spanish, how she felt about living between Christ, way up on the hill, and all those people with such material wealth down below. He said she smiled a toothless grin. But without a moment's pause, pointed down the hill and said, "For them to get up there, they need to go through us"! Which when you think about it, is kind of profound!

Both of our lessons today speak to that idea! James says "suppose someone comes to your meeting, in essence, to church, who is rich. And another person comes who is poor". "Don't show favoritism"! God's Law is clear, he adds!

“If you favor one over another, you are committing a sin,” he says. Live your faith. Live what you believe. Because without deeds, faith is utterly useless! Then in Mark, we find a foreign woman, a Syro-Phoenician, it says, an undesirable, coming to Jesus in faith and receiving healing for her little girl. What do these passages say?

Up to this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has pretty much stayed in Jewish territory. He does make a quick trip across the Sea of Galilee into Gentile lands, where He did heal a man possessed by a demon. But then He jumps right back in the boat and returns to His side of the lake.

All of His energy so far, all of His preaching and teaching has been directed to the Hebrew people, to the People of God. All of His other healings have taken place in Galilee as well: the man with Leprosy, the Paralytic, and the demon-possessed man in the synagogue, the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, the little girl who had died!

All of the miracles we’ve seen have been in Jewish territory: like calming the storm, the walking on water, the feeding of the Five Thousand. Even the Parables that Jesus has shared were told to the religiously “in-crowd”! Jesus has shared the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Freely, in fact! But so far, only with God’s Chosen People. All of His efforts, up until now, have been devoted to reconciling the Nation of Israel with Almighty God! And they, for the most part, have rejected His offer!

Beginning in chapter six though, we see Jesus crossing the lake again, heading over to Gennesaret. He even lands in more or less the same place as before. This is where the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law come and question Him about His Disciples breaking with Tradition. And it's where Jesus calls them "hypocrites", remember! And then, after teaching there for a while, and healing a few folks there, Jesus moves on to the northwest, to the region of Tyre and Sidon, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. What does all that say? Anything?

He is in modern-day Lebanon now, about twenty or thirty miles down the beach from what is now Beirut. Jesus has traveled through winding mountain passes and hot desert valleys to get there, about forty miles or so. He is in foreign land now. And when He arrives, He sequesters Himself away! Jesus "entered a house," it says, "and did not want anyone to know it"!

Don't you wonder why? Why is He there? What's He doing? Mark doesn't tell us. Maybe Jesus was exhausted? Ministry can sometimes do that. Maybe He wants to steer clear of the limelight for a while, away from being "on". Maybe He just wants to be incognito? No cell phone, no internet? Maybe Jesus wants some private time to teach His Disciples, although they're not even mentioned in the text? Or maybe He simply wants to avoid the constant verbal attacks by His opponents? The Scribes and the Pharisees have really been on His case lately! Maybe Jesus is just looking for some rest?

I mean, Tyre was a wealthy tourist area. Not unlike Rio de Janeiro is today. And we do see Jesus often making a point of getting away from the rigors of ministry from time-to-time. He “leaves the crowds”. He “sends His Disciples on ahead”. He “goes off by Himself to pray”. Maybe this is simply a vacation, or a Sabbatical of sorts? A long weekend? Maybe Jesus is currently sitting on the deck of a Cottage, in a first Century equivalent of an Adirondack Chair, with His feet up on an ottoman, sipping lemonade? Who knows? ... What we do know is, that He couldn't keep His Presence a secret. News of Him has preceded His arrival. That shouldn't surprise us. A little earlier, in chapter three, we hear of people coming from this very area of Tyre and Sidon, down to Galilee to see what Jesus is doing. Maybe He is already a celebrity, one of international renown!

But here is the point, I think! This is Gentile territory, the wrong side of the tracks! We're no longer in the Promised Land. We're not in Kansas anymore Dorothy! Jesus has left the building! And a woman, who in that culture would have been considered a Second-Class citizen at best, barges into the privacy of His cottage and falls down at Jesus' feet!

Remember, no respectable woman would ever travel in public without the accompaniment of her husband or father, or at least several brothers. That would have been scandalous! And Mark tells us that she was a Greek, to boot. He then goes on to say that she was born in Syrian Phoenicia! He says it twice in fact, that she is a Gentile, an unclean person by Jewish standards—twice, so that we don't miss the point!

Just being in the vicinity of a Gentile would make any God-Fearing Jew unclean. That's why the Jewish crowd didn't follow Jesus into Pilate's Palace during the Passion. If they had gone beyond the courtyard, they would have been ritually unclean, and therefore not allowed to eat the Passover. Even Peter, at the house of Cornelius in Acts, states right up front that associating with Gentiles is against the Law! So, this woman, walking into that house, goes against all social and religious norms! And anyone in the first Century, hearing about it, would have been aghast!

And it gets worse! The region of Syrian Phoenicia, where this lady was born, present day Lebanon, was just about as bad of a place in Jewish eyes as there could possibly be! The Old Testament Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel, Amos and Zechariah all describe it as a terrible place, a place filled with the "wealthy and godless oppressors of Israel"!

So, imagine a woman, alone, a Greek woman from Syrian Phoenicia, pretty much demanding a private audience with Jesus while He is trying to get some rest. Falling at His feet even! Imagine what that would have looked like! Imagine the exchange outside the door, if the Disciples were indeed there! "You can't go in there," says Peter. "Well, I am going in, whether you like it or not!" "I said you can't go in there, woman." "Listen mister, I said I am going in. I have a sick daughter at home, and I am going in there and talk to that Prophet of yours. And He is going to fix her! Now get out of my way before I give you a swift kick in the knickers."

She is determined! You've got to respect that! And who wouldn't be, her daughter is in real trouble! But notice that she obviously has faith too. Faith that Jesus can heal her daughter. I mean she takes the time to look for Jesus, to be in His Presence. She is willing to cross all those social, and religious, and normative boundary lines, in order to speak with Him. She is tenacious in her pursuit! She even argues with Jesus over "why" her daughter should be healed! She trusts Jesus. She believes in Jesus. So, she comes to Jesus and talks with Him. She is not about to let anything get in the way! So, what does that say? What does that say to us?

I picture Peter jumping aside, as those fierce eyes burn right through him. But I also imagine him following her into the house stammering, "I tried Jesus. I told her that you didn't want to be disturbed. But she wouldn't listen!" Then I hear her say, "Jesus, is that your name, Jesus? They say you are a Prophet. Some say you are a mighty Prophet sent by God. Some even say that you are the Jewish Messiah! Well I'm asking you. No, I'm begging you. Jesus, Lord, Son of David—a term for Messiah, by the way—heal my daughter!"

She is desperate! She has most likely exhausted all conventional means of help, like doctors and such. And since she is a Gentile, she most likely has already prayed to all of her pagan gods as well. Healing was a primary purpose of pagan gods! She is like a soldier in a foxhole at this point, with bullets zinging all around, who suddenly turns to the One True God! Or like someone lying on their deathbed who finally accepts Christ!

She is frantic, right! In a bind! It's a last-minute thing, and she's an outsider. Technically she has no right to even ask! She is not part of the family, not one of God's Chosen People! She has never supported Jesus' ministry in any way! She probably hasn't even heard Him preach! The absolute only thing she has going for her, is her bold, tenacious faith! ...And apparently, that's enough! ...So, what does that say?

Can you believe it! Outsiders getting in! Those on the margins, those on the fringe being welcomed! Women and Gentiles and Wealthy people and all! All because of faith! You mean there is no special treatment for anyone, good or bad, wealthy or poor, someone who has lived by the Law their entire life, or someone who is brand new to the faith? The homeless person and the condo-owner, are both acceptable in the eyes of Jesus? ...Yeah!

But let me point out something else. Something you may not have noticed. Prior to today's lesson, Jesus is having less and less to do with the religious "insiders", with those who don't really want to repent—and more and more to do with those who honestly want a personal relationship with Him. It started with the Scribes and the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law, remember. At first Jesus tried to enlighten them. But then, with their harden hearts and all, Jesus, basically gives up. Then we see Him start to distance Himself from those in the Jewish crowds who are just looking for the spectacle, or the show, those who only want the free bread.

Jesus takes the Disciples off by themselves more and more, and devotes time to teaching only them. He spends much more time with the Twelve, in fact, than He does with the rest of the Disciples. And more time with three of the Twelve, than with the other nine. And more time with Peter than anyone else! Again-and-again in the Gospel of Mark we see Jesus “working with” those who are genuinely seeking a personal relationship with Him! But also, paying less and less attention to those who aren’t. What do you think that says?

This section of Scripture, is a turning point! Prior to this passage, Jesus has spent all of His time and energy with the Jewish folks in and around Galilee. But after this passage, the Gospel is spread to the outside world. Prior to this lesson there was a miraculous feeding of five thousand people on the Jewish side of the lake. But after this passage there is a miraculous feeding of four thousand on the other side of the lake. Yes, we are told that the Bread of Heaven must “first” be offered to the Children of God. Jesus makes that clear! It even sounds a little insulting coming from His lips! But if it falls through their fingers, we’re told—or if it is intentionally dropped, or thrown down in disgust—then even the dogs are welcome to quickly move in and scoop it up! ...Harsh language, huh! But what does it say to modern-day lukewarm Christians? It sort of makes you wonder who will be seated at the Heavenly Banquet, doesn’t it? Who is actually acceptable and who is not?

It is Good News if you are sitting halfway up the hill in distress, yet, filled with faith. But it is Bad News if you are simply a “Religious Tourist”, isn’t it? If you only want to take in the sights. It makes one ask, is my relationship personal, rooted in obedience and faith, lived out in Christian love to others? Or is Jesus just a statue for me, something to periodically come and see?

I remember shortly after we got our new sign out front, here at the church, being out there changing the hours on it. And just as I squatted down I heard someone ask, “Are you the Maintenance Man here, or the Pastor?” The man was kind of scruffy, but we talked for a few minutes. And I began to suspect that he didn’t have any family in the area, or even a place to stay. So, I asked him, “Do you need anything, maybe some money for food, or for gas?” He said, “No. But I would like to come into the church and pray for a while.”

So, we prayed for a while. And then I asked him if there was any help that I could give him, maybe a ride.” And He said, “No, I don’t need anything. But I would like to look at one of your Bibles.” So, I offered him a Bible to take with him. And he said, “Maybe I’ll take two, so I can give one to somebody I meet.”

The man left shortly after that, and I have never seen him since. I have no idea where he came from, or where he went. I never even asked him his name. But I have often wondered, since that day, if maybe that was Jesus? Or was it just someone I had to go through, to get to Him. And all of God’s people said, Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

Thank you, Lord, for reaching out to us—to all of us—to the good, the bad, and the ugly! Thank you for laying your healing hands on our bodies, and bathing our hearts and our minds in your peace. Thank you for giving us smiles, Lord, and for the joy that carries us throughout the day. And thank you for loving us, even more than we love ourselves. You are truly awesome, God!

We are sinners Lord, one and all. We each fall short of your Glory, and each fall short of your design for our lives. We have let you down, Lord, time and time again. And yet you are there with outstretched arms, ever calling us home. Many of us, Lord, have taken you for granted. And many of us, Lord, still do so today. So please, stir up your Spirit within us, that we will turn and seek your face.

Lord, you have searched our hearts just now in prayer, just as you do, with each and every breath that we take. You know of our celebrations and our blessings. You are aware of our troubles and our pain. You know the places of happiness Lord, and the places that need healing. And so today, Father, together, we bring all these things before your Altar of Grace.

Please touch our lives as we do Lord. Please bless us in ways beyond our imagining. Please quicken our hearts with your own Holy Spirit. And please, draw each of us into a closer relationship with you, so that we might drink from your Fountain of Life.

Lord, you know we hurt when our loved ones hurt. And we know that you do as well. So please, smile on those we lift up before you. Please be with.....We ask these things, Father, in the Name of Jesus, our Risen Lord and Savior. And we do this by praying the very prayer that He taught us, saying, Our Father...