

How the uninvited get into God's party!

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[0 : 00] Morning everyone. Great to see you. We've already done this in the early service and we had a good turnout. So it's wonderful that we can all be here and we can have space to gather together around God's Word.

So please open your Bibles at Mark 7 if they're not yet. So I want to ask you how you feel when you're not invited to a party. Have you been in that situation before?

Maybe your friends or people at school have started a party and a birthday party but they didn't invite you. You don't feel very nice, do you? Or maybe some guys at work are having a party but you don't get the invite.

You don't crack the knot. How do you feel? You feel a bit disappointed. I suppose it depends on whose party it is. If it's someone you know well and you know that they have great parties, you definitely feel a bit bummed out that you didn't crack the knot.

I mean, if it's not that, you know, you don't know a person that well, maybe it's that boring guy from work, you don't feel that disappointed. You didn't really want to go to his party anyway.

[1 : 03] So it depends who it is that determines how disappointed you are. But I want to ask you how would you feel if it was God that didn't invite you to his party?

Because the fact is, the Bible tells us, the Old Testament tells us and the New about God's plan for this world. And it's going to be a party.

There's going to be feasting. There's going to be restoration. All the things that God has planned for this world is what we learn about, the restored creation. But what we forget about is that most of us here weren't invited to it originally.

We were Gentiles. We are Gentiles by birth, not Jews. And so technically we weren't invited.

Because these promises that God made about this restoration of creation that he's going to give, this redeeming promise that he gives are mostly given just to Israel.

Isaiah 35 that we read earlier. I'll read some of the verses again. The wilderness and the dry land will be glad. The desert will rejoice and blossom like a wildflower.

[2 : 14] It will blossom abundantly and will so rejoice with joy in singing. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. The splendor of Carmel and Sharon. And we'll see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.

The eyes of the blind will be opened. The ears of the deaf unstopped. This is talking about restoration, a removal of the brokenness of creation. But, I mean, have you ever read these and gone, Carmel and Sharon?

What's that about? That's got no bearing on me. That's because it doesn't. This is a promise to Israel. Not to the nations. You want to know where we are in this passage? We are in verse 4. Here is your God. Vengeance is coming. God's retribution is coming. Retribution to who? Who is God going to judge?

The nations, the Bible says. Those outside of Israel. And so, as we read the Old Testament as Gentiles, we discover the rather uncomfortable truth.

[3 : 10] We weren't invited to this party. Originally. And we need to understand that. We need to realize that. When we read a lot of the Old Testament.

And it's only when we get that. That we weren't originally invited to God's party. God's restoration of this world. It's only when we get that. That we will truly appreciate today's stories in Mark chapter 7. Which are so profound. Because Jesus continues to do what he's been doing in Mark. Which is to bring signs of this restoration. This kingdom of God coming. And healing people.

He does another couple of miracles here. But the surprising thing, I wondered if you realized. Is where he does them. Mark makes a note.

Of where he does them. And to whom he brings this restoration. And these are Gentiles. They are outside of Israel. The geographical markers in this passage are very important. In other words. [4 : 11] Here. In these stories. We are reading about. Uninvited guests. To God's restoration. Starting to experience.

The restoration power that Jesus brings. And these stories are vital. And they're in Mark. Because they show us how uninvited guests. Like you and me. Can still get into the party. And so let's. Take note. Of what happens. In these stories. There are two. Signs. Two miracles. That happen. With two different people. The woman. So if you look in Mark 7. From verse 24. To 30. Is the first story. And then another story. Also in a Gentile region. So. Jesus is in the northwest. Outside of Israel. In the first story. And then he goes down to the. East. Across the Jordan. To another Gentile region. Two Gentile regions. Two stories. About Gentiles. Experiencing. The restoration. [5 : 09] That. The Old Testament. Only said really was. Was for Jews. Well that's what they understood. And so the first story. Is how an unqualified Gentile.

Actually manages to find restoration. For her daughter in this case. So. We're told. About her. Look what we're told about her. In verse. 26. The woman was a Gentile. A Syrophenician. By birth. And this was in the land of Tyre. And Sidon. Mark wants us to understand. Who this woman is. And where she comes from. And if we understand Tyre. And Sidon. If you look up Tyre. And Sidon. In the Old Testament. There's nothing good about it. In fact. Every time it's mentioned. In the Old Testament. It's mentioned. As the enemies of Israel. Which are under judgment. So for example. In Joel chapter 3. Verse 4. It says this. This is God speaking. Tyre and Sidon. And all the territories of Philistia.

[6 : 04] What are you to me? I will quickly bring retribution on your heads. For you took my silver and gold. And carried my finest treasures to your temples. You sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

To the Greeks. To remove them far from their own territory. Look. I'm about to rouse them up from the place where you sold them. I will bring retribution on your heads. This is God speaking to the ancient enemies of Israel.

Of which this woman was a part. The Sidonians. These people. The Syrophenicians. They were like the villain in a Bond movie.

You know. He does a whole lot of bad stuff. He's a really bad guy. And then at the end. You're waiting for the villain to get what's coming to them. And you feel really satisfied when he does. Right? That's who the Sidonians were. And so that context helps us to explain why Jesus answered this woman the way he did.

[7 : 02] Look at Mark 7. This woman comes. And she's in great need. And originally you read Jesus' answer to her. And you think. How could he be so rude?

But when you understand who she is and where she comes from. It makes more sense. So follow along from verse 25. After hearing about him. A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit. Came and filled at his feet. The woman was a Gentile. Syrophenician by birth. And she was asking him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her. Look at this answer. Let the little children be fed first.

Because it isn't right to take the children's bread. And throw it to the dogs. Whew. That's not politically correct at all. Is it? I mean that's quite a.

It seems rude and borderline racist. But what we need to understand. Is that Jesus is using a parable. To point out quite rightly. That this woman has no right.

[8 : 04] To benefit from God's plans for Israel. To restore them. And he's right. And he uses the parable of a dog. Having no right to the food of the children.

In a family. Which is quite right. It's an apt parable. I think of my dog. Finnin. And when he was a puppy. He assumed that he had the same rights as our children.

He assumed that he could eat. Any food that was on any plate. That he had access to. He assumed that he could just lie on any bed. It took him a while to learn that he's a dog.

And he has no right to what the children have a right to. He had to learn his place. He still I don't think has fully grasped it. But just as he had to learn his place.

And he had to know his place as a dog. Even though it sounds shocking to our modern sensitive ears. Jesus is using a parable to say the same thing to this woman. You have no right to the children's food.

[9 : 03] You don't have a right to the restoration plans for the covenant people. You're not in a covenant with God. You have no covenant relationship with God. What makes you think you can access restoration that God has planned for his people?

That's what Jesus was reminding this woman of. And you know what? I think we need a reminder of that. We take it for granted that we have a right to all the things we sing about.

And all the things we read about in the Bible. And all God's plans of restoration. And all the blessings that he gives. And you read in the Old Testament. You read of God's great plans. And we read them and automatically we think, Oh, they apply to us.

We have a right to them. We don't. We have no right to God's new creation. We are sinners. You know you're a sinner. And you know by your own nature you have no right in God's perfect world. In God's restored creation. That's what we need a reminder of. We need that humbling reminder that by nature we have no right for God's salvation.

[10 : 06] And no right to belong to God's plans for this world. And then we read the first surprise in the story. The woman's answer. In which she shows that she totally gets what Jesus is saying.

And she agrees with him. Look at verse 28. But she replied to him, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Do you know, this woman was the first person in Mark to understand the parable of Jesus. You realize that? I mean, he's been speaking in parables.

And do you notice Mark has pointed out time and time again the Jews don't understand him. Even his own disciples don't understand his parables. This Syrophenician Gentile woman is the first to understand a parable of Jesus.

That's quite striking. And she admits in her answer that she has no place. Yes, I have no place. I have no right to ask for the blessings that God has promised to Israel.

[11 : 12] But then she develops the parable and basically says, but surely the blessings to Israel can also benefit the whole world. Surely God's plans are for more than just the restoration of Israel.

And Jesus is pretty much blown away by that answer. Look at how he responds. Verse 29. Then he told her, Because of this reply, you may go.

The demon has left your daughter. You see, this Gentile woman's answer shows that she has an understanding that the Israelites themselves had been missing about God's plans for this world. Namely, that, well, not only does she call Jesus Lord, not only does she recognize his authority, which none of the Jews in Mark had done yet, by the way. You can look through Mark. Nobody had called him Lord yet.

This is the first time in Mark that Jesus is called Lord. She recognizes who this is. And then she also hones in on something that Israel had long forgotten.

[12 : 20] And that is that God's plans were always for the whole world, not just for the nation of Israel, right from the beginning. I mean, you go back to God's original promise to Abraham when he kicked it all off in Genesis chapter 12.

He says to Abraham, verse 3, he says, Through you, all nations will be blessed. God's scope, God's heart has always been for the nations, always for all nations on earth, the nations that he made.

But Israel had forgotten that. Israel for centuries had thought that God's promises were only for them. And so they had begun to presume they were the only ones worthy for the kingdom.

When in fact God's plan was always that restoration one day would be made available to anyone who wants it. God's plan was always that restoration and life and being fixed of this brokenness that we're under will one day be available to anyone who wants it.

And it was available to this woman as we see how the story ends in verse 30. When she went back to her home, she found her child lying on the bed and the demon was gone.

[13 : 39] This child experienced a little bit of that restoration power, even though these were the enemies of Israel. We've got to ask the question, what was it about her that caused her to be able to access this power for her daughter to be restored?

Because that answers the question how any of us can access it today. And her answer shows us. Her answer shows us the only way for you and I to access life and restoration and redemption and salvation and all the promises that God has laid out for Israel in the Old Testament, all this

restoration and new creation.

How do any of us access it? Unworthy as we are, we have to have the same attitude as this woman. Look at her answer again. All she does is she admits that she didn't deserve it. That's all she does.

And then she falls at Jesus' feet and she relies completely on His mercy. That is all. That is enough. What qualified this woman for kingdom power was to admit that she didn't qualify.

And it's the same for all of us. That alone is the first vital step to entering into God's grace and God's plans for this world is to, from your heart of hearts, realize and admit that you don't deserve it and that there's nothing you can do to qualify for it.

[15 : 11] That is the only way that you can qualify for it, ironically. To admit our unqualification. But it's harder than it sounds to do that.

Isn't it? Because of our natural pride. Naturally, we hate to admit that we're not worthy of things. We want to show God and other people how worthy and qualified we are for His kingdom.

But none of that is going to access the kingdom and the power of Jesus. The only thing that will allow us to be part of God's kingdom is to realize, really, that we are unqualified for it.

And that is why the greatest Anglican prayers are the ones we don't like. You know, we pray a lot of prayers from the prayer book. And you might, you know, think to yourself, oh, another one of these set prayers.

Why do we pray these? Well, because they force us to pray things we wouldn't normally pray.

That's, I think, one of the biggest reasons we use these deeply, richly theological prayers.

[16 : 19] And it's proven by the fact that the ones we don't like are the ones we need the most to pray and realize about ourselves. Like the prayer of humble access, that we pray before communion often. You know that one?

Where we say, based on this story, actually, we are not worthy so much as even to gather up the crumbs from under your table. We say those words when they're in the prayer book, but in our minds, in the way we live, if we pretend that we actually are worthy, of course we can gather up the crumbs.

You know, I mean, I'm a decent guy. I'm a decent person. I've done things that God would like.

Surely I'm worthy. But then, you know, we pray prayers that seem to contradict that.

Or the ancient Anglican confession, my favorite, which includes the line, there is no health in us.

You notice how many modern Anglican prayers have actually removed that line because it's too offensive for our sensitivities.

Surely there's some good in me. And that's why liturgy is so important, because it helps us to see ourselves in a way we wouldn't normally, and therefore pray prayers for things we wouldn't normally pray.

[17 : 30] Because it's hard to say those things and really mean them. There is no health in us.

We're not worthy to gather up even the crumbs under your table. We're not worthy of any good.

That's hard. And it actually goes against our instincts to admit that we're unqualified, given that everything else in our life is about qualifying ourselves for things. And all our energies that we spend our days on are about qualifying, whether you're a school pupil, whether you're a student, whether you're an employee, whether you're a business owner.

Whatever you're doing every day is actually you're trying to qualify for something. As a learner at school, you're trying to get ready for exams and qualify for the next grade.

As a student, you're trying to earn your qualification and make sure your assignments and your dissertation qualify you. It impresses people who are evaluating you. As an employee, you're trying to qualify for a promotion.

You're trying to do extra work better than the person next to you, so you can qualify. All our focus is on qualifying for things. As a business owner, you're trying to qualify your business in the market to be more competitive.

[18 : 36] Even finding a spouse. If you're still in that stage of life where you're hoping to find someone you can marry, what do you do before you go out on maybe a date?

You look in the mirror and you qualify yourself and you make sure that you're qualified and looking good and make sure that you can start the conversation with a funny joke and show how...

You know, that's what first dates typically are about, trying to impress the person and tell them all fancy stories about yourself. Here's when I was hiking in Tibet. You're trying to qualify yourself with

other people.

Our minds are wired to do that in every sphere of life. We're trying to qualify ourselves and that carries over into how we interact with God. We don't realize it, but we often try to qualify ourselves with God as well.

Look, God. Look what I've done. Look how good I am at not sinning this week. Look how I've helped people. Look how I've kept my thoughts pure. We're just trying to qualify again.

[19 : 39] So it goes totally against our instincts to do what this woman did and to admit that we can't qualify. And instead of the kingdom and the people Jesus is looking to come to him and rely on him, we become these religious people and most religions in the world are all about qualifying, building up our heavenly CV.

But the kingdom of God is not like that. The kingdom of God is only for those who realize they can never qualify for it. See, because thinking that we can qualify for this, thinking that we can qualify for God's plans for the world actually stops us from relying on the one he sent.

Stops us from submitting ourselves completely and falling at the feet of the Messiah that this woman did. Thinking that we can qualify stops us from actually coming to Jesus. And that's what Israel's problem was.

Throughout the centuries, their religious presumption was the problem that God held them to account for and it made them miss Jesus when he came. That's what we've been seeing in Mark. These Israelites, these Pharisees, their Messiah is here and that they miss him because they think that they can qualify through all the other things that they do.

And last week we saw Jesus prove to them that they couldn't and yet they still think they can and therefore they miss Jesus. They don't realize who he is. Their religious presumption has made them deaf and blind to hear and to see Christ.

[21 : 13] Which is incidentally why the next miracle is Jesus healing a deaf man. It's no mistake that Mark puts that as the next one he records. In fact, the next two miracles in Mark, the one in our passage and then one in chapter 8, are very important miracles in the book of Mark.

So if you look at chapter 7, 31 to 37, that's the first miracle of Jesus healing a deaf man.

And then the next miracle we read about is in chapter 8, verse 22 onwards, where he heals a blind man. We're going to look at that in more detail next week.

But let's just look at this miracle of the deaf man first. Here is someone who has no access to Jesus. In fact, it's unlikely he's even heard of Jesus.

He can't hear anything. He's deaf. And so he has no access to Jesus' teachings. And as a Gentile in the Decapolis, he actually religiously has no access to Jesus.

[22 : 21] This guy has absolutely no access to Jesus, physically and spiritually, and yet Jesus gives him access. He opens his ears so he can hear him, and he touches him. And he breaks all the social distancing rules so that he can bring this man restoration power.

And this miracle is actually symbolic. Mark has chosen not to record all the miracles Jesus did, but he chose specific ones. And this one and the next one are highly symbolic miracles.

Look in your Bibles. So at the end of chapter 7, he heals a deaf man. Towards the end of chapter 8, from verse 22, he heals a blind man.

You know Mark likes sandwiching things, putting two things on either side of a central thing. What is in the middle of these two healing miracles? Look at chapter 8, verse 18.

Jesus, look at what he says to his own disciples. Do you have eyes and not see? Do you have ears and not hear? Do you see that?

[23 : 24] In the middle of Jesus healing a deaf man and a blind man is him telling his disciples that they are blind and deaf. And this miracle shows, these miracles here show that they still and we still need deafness and blindness healed, and that will only happen by an act of God.

Not by something that we can do or something that we can understand. Only by divine intervention. In fact, these miracles, if you read the details of them, which we can do in our Bible studies in the week, they're couched with a whole lot of creation language.

From Genesis. Jesus speaking. Using tangible spits. And the people at the end saying he's done everything well, which can also be translated, he makes everything good, just like God declared in Genesis chapter 1.

These are creation miracles. These are creation acts. Because they're here to show us that just as much as we needed God to give us air and water and heartbeats in creation, all the things we need

every day, so as much do we need him to give us ears to hear him.

And the Israelites needed it and we need it. Do you realize that? Do you realize how deaf you actually are by yourself? That no matter how many degrees you have, no matter how much studying you've done, no matter how well you know your Bible, you can't get this.

[25 : 00] You can't understand it and you can't believe it and you can't trust in Christ without him supernaturally unstopping your ears to be able to hear it and understand it.

If you hear this and it speaks to your heart and you believe it, that is a divine act of creation, new creation in you. You need to realize that.

And that's why many of Jesus' own people didn't get him, because they didn't realize that they were deaf. They thought that they could figure it out.

They thought that they knew God's plans and how God was going to bring them about and what God wanted them to do. But they were deaf. His own disciples, he says. And that's why many well-read, devoted religious people today still don't get it, even though they go to church every Sunday.

And so do you see why these two miracles are together as we wrap up? Do you see the common thread, the common theme in both of these miracles?

[26 : 00] Do you? How can uninvited Gentiles get into the party? How can deaf, unreligious, unlearned people actually understand and believe in Christ?

Well, here's the take-home for you and for all of us. It's by admitting that you don't qualify that qualifies you for the kingdom. And it's when you realize that you're actually deaf that you can begin to hear.

I'll say it again. If you want to understand what these two miracles are telling us, it's this. It's by admitting that you don't qualify that qualifies you. And it's when you realize that you're actually deaf that you can begin to hear.

Have you done that? Have you come to the point of realizing in your heart of hearts that you can never actually qualify for God's favor? Because only then can you be freed from trying to, and only then will you truly learn, like this woman learned, to fall at the Lord's feet and look to His mercy alone and make Him the absolute center of your life.

That will never truly happen until you realize that you can never qualify for God's kingdom by yourself. Only then will you actually fall at the mercy of Christ and say, You are my Lord.

[27 : 22] Follow and lead me and I will follow. I will go where you want. I will do what you want. I need you more than anything in my life. If you don't have the humility that this woman had of realizing you can't qualify any other way for God's kingdom, you will never actually devote yourself fully to Christ.

And I think many Christians still need to do that. Many people who come to church and believe, you know, what we said in the Apostles' Creed earlier.

I think many Christians, many of us even without realizing it, need to shed our religious presumption and admit truly the words that we say that there is no health in us.

Only then will we come every day to feed on the mercy of Christ and what He can give us. And also, we need to realize how deaf we really are in our own strength.

No matter how long you've been coming to church, we are still today as much in need of Jesus to do a miracle in our hearts as we ever were and as in much need as this man was every day for Jesus to unblock our deaf Gentile ears so that we can actually hear His voice and follow it to the life that He wants to give us.

[28 : 47] Do you realize that about yourself? Because you know what? Realizing that about yourself, these two things will do. If you realize that you are unqualified for the kingdom and you can never qualify, you won't see coming to church as a way to qualify for God.

But if you realize how deaf you actually are, you will realize how much you need to come to church and sit under the Word of God. So I'll see you next week. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for Mark and how you inspired him to write these words so that we can learn these truths about ourselves that we find so difficult to admit that we are unqualified for your kingdom and that we are deaf.

Lord, thank you, Jesus, for making a way to fulfill God's plans for the blessing of the nations by doing everything to qualify us.

Help us to humble ourselves and rely on your mercy. Help us to realize that without your intervention in our lives, we are deaf and blind and help us to listen to your voice and help us to just value doing what we're doing now and coming to church and hearing this stuff and understanding it. [30 : 06] And help us to realize that you are doing a work in us and Lord, may we continue to hear and follow you in Jesus' name. Amen.