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All Praying Together

Scripture Readings – Exegetical Background

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Mark 7:24-37

The two healing stories in Mark 7 show Jesus bringing healing and restoration to those in need. In both cases, Jesus is in gentile territory, and so deals – explicitly in the first healing – with those considered unclean by the religious hierarchy. The healings follow his critique of the impurity laws upheld by the Pharisees and Scribes; for Jesus, it is what comes out of a person’s heart that defiles, not what goes into their mouth (Mark 7:1-23).

In the first healing story, Jesus is confronted by a gentile woman who begs him to free her daughter from a demon and yet her request is met by a surprising refusal. Jesus explains that the ‘children’ – the people of Israel – are fed first, and it would be wrong to throw their food to the ‘dogs’. Jesus’ explanation fits with his declared mission to the ‘children of Israel’, a point made explicitly in the parallel account in Matthew (Matt 15:24). The fact that the children are to be fed ‘first’, however, is significant, since it hints that God will later reach out to ‘feed’ the other nations as well, and – indeed – following Jesus’ resurrection the Spirit is poured out on gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 10:44-48).

In response to Jesus’ explanation, the gentile woman courageously points out that even the ‘dogs’ eat the scraps from the children’s table. Impressed, Jesus praises her confident response, matching his praise of gentile faith elsewhere in the gospels. The woman has yet more faith to take Jesus at his word, and – returning home – finds her child free from the demon.

In the second healing story, Jesus is again in gentile territory – in the region of the Decapolis – and a man, mute and with a speech impediment, is brought to Jesus for healing. The term translated ‘speech impediment’ is rare, and occurs only here in the New Testament. It also, however, occurs in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of the Old Testament in Isaiah 35:6, and Mark probably alludes to this prophecy of God’s coming restoration. Jesus miracles are to be understood as signs that God’s kingdom is at hand.

The description of Jesus’ healing is lengthier than usual, and his actions – such as the use of spittle - find parallels in other ancient accounts of healing. In contrast to the lengthy incantations used by other healers, however, Jesus heals with a single word, and so shows his unique authority as the one sent from God. The healing is accompanied by Jesus’ command to keep quiet, but – like elsewhere in Mark – the news spreads rapidly. Jesus wants to be known on his own terms – as the one bringing and teaching the kingdom – and not simply as a wonder-working Messiah.



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Matthew 6:5-18

The Lord's Prayer appears twice in the New Testament – in Luke (11:2-4) as well as in Matthew – but it is Matthew's version that is the longest, and Matthew's version that has shaped the church's use of this famous prayer. The prayer appears at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5 – 7), and also as part of Jesus' treatment of a trio of spiritual practices: almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

The treatment of almsgiving, which immediately precedes this passage, includes an admonition to 'give in secret' as a way of avoiding self-promotion (Matt 6:1-4), while the advice on fasting that ends this passage similarly admonishes disciples of Jesus to avoid 'showing off' their piety (Matt 6:16-18). It is no surprise, then, that Jesus begins his treatment of prayer by also warning against trumpeting devotion. Instead, disciples are called to pray in their 'room', away from the gaze and admiration of others.

Jesus also warns against the 'gentile' tendency of multiplying words in prayer, critiquing the assumption that God can be manipulated through a certain form and quantity of words. Instead, Jesus advises approaching God as the Father who knows what we need, and offers this now-famous prayer as a model of such an approach.

The address to God as 'Father' invites disciples to approach God as a parent, expressing a filial relationship that – as Paul explains – Jesus makes possible (Gal 4:4-7). This Father, however, is also 'in heaven', transcendent and all-powerful. The prayer that the name of the Father 'be hallowed' is not about God changing, but about the world changing to be a place where God is recognised and honoured by all.

The request that God's kingdom come is a prayer for God to bring about the promised reign of love and justice, announced and inaugurated by Jesus. This is the will of God, and discipleship involves seeking this kingdom above all else (Matt 6:33).

Asking God for daily bread is a prayer for basic needs, particularly appropriate for disciples whose pursuit of the kingdom leads to the sacrifice of security (Matt 19:27-30). Some also suggest that this is a prayer for God's 'eschatological bread', the blessings of the future coming into the present.

Prayer for forgiveness assumes that disciples will fail in numerous ways. God is always ready to forgive, but – in turn – calls his followers to forgive all who sin against them.

The last clause turns to the future, praying for deliverance from the time of trial and rescue from the 'evil one'. Debate continues on the exact meaning of these phrases, but the thrust of this petition is clear: disciples are to ask God to protect them from that which leads them astray.

In Matthew, the prayer is followed by a further stress on the importance of forgiveness, since a lack of mercy to others hinders God's mercy upon us. Knowing the depth of God's forgiveness, however, frees us to show forgiveness to others, as the story of the sinful woman vividly illustrates (Luke 7:36-50).