

Sermon 1761

Mark 7.31-37

September 12, 2021

“I gotta hand it to the devil with this COVID stuff,” my friend said.

“What, he finally found a way to shut down churches?” I asked.

“No, he finally found a respectable way to keep Christians away from churches once they safely reopened.”

There’s not much you can do when buildings or minds are closed.

The Bible always portrays the coming of faith and the spread of the Word as powerful miracles. The anti-Trinity of the devil, the unbelieving world and the sinful human nature have always been throwing up “Closed” signs to the Gospel. It takes an act of God, an act of Jesus, to order that which was closed to

Be Opened!

1. To hear (31-35).
2. To speak (36-37).

“Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man (31-32).”

Audiologists aren’t surprised. If you can’t hear you can’t talk. From infancy we hear sounds, watch lips move and put two and two together. Words are coming from mommy or daddy’s mouth! It doesn’t take much longer for us to put three and three together as we imitate the way mom or dad’s mouth move and put out sounds ourselves! Soon after we put four and four together, analyze what we are saying, compare it to what we are hearing and adjust our mouths to get closer to what we are hearing. Forget about mynah birds or parrots. We are the ultimate imitators!

But what if that golden cord between ear and mouth is broken? What if we can’t hear? It is a miracle the man could barely talk at all! He had figured out people were communicating with words and he tried to make his mouth look like their mouths. But without being able to hear what they were saying and what he was saying, it was effort wasted. So his friends bring him to Jesus. They have heard of Jesus’ power. They trust in his goodness. Jesus can help.

By nature we are similar to this deaf, mute man. Oh, we can talk all day about things we know nothing about. We can natter about things that don’t matter at all. But when it comes to getting to heaven, when it comes to finding forgiveness for the evil we have spoken, thought or done, we are closed to anything God has to say. We can’t hear his invitations. We can’t pronounce his praises.

Proof is demanded. After all, I am insulting a lot of people, some of them respected members of our world. OK. The Olympics ended just over a month ago. What a chance to put aside the divisions and rivalries and come together as the

family of man! What a chance at the opening ceremonies to strike a note which raises our sights to see what we could be! Singers from all over the world performed virtually. They were all singing the same song. “We are Family” by Sister Sledge? Nope, though it would have been retro cool. “We are the World?” Good guess. They sang a song by John Lennon. “Imagine there’s no heaven.” That’s what they sang throughout the world. That’s what the sinful human nature figures will unite us—our enmity against such a puny deity that if we simply imagine he doesn’t exist, everyone will live as one. No wonder they hand out so much birth control to athletes at the Olympics. With a religion like that, who can expect moral individuals?

How do you get through to people like this? How do you get through to anyone who is controlled by the sinful human nature? Jesus knew exactly what to do.

“After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ (which means, ‘Be opened!’). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly (33-35).”

The words of God are powerful. With a word the heavens and the earth were created. With a word the wind and the waves were stilled. But people are not rocks. People are not winds. People have souls. They have to hear the Word. The message has to get through to them. What care and consideration Jesus shows! He leads the man away from the distractions of the crowd, so it is only the two of them. Jesus puts his fingers into the man’s ears. He has the man’s full attention. Jesus is going to do something that will help him hear. Jesus spits. Something out of his mouth—words!—are going to make a miracle happen. Jesus touches the man’s tongue. He is going to do something that will help him speak. Jesus looks up to heaven. That’s where the help will come from. “I will lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord (Psalm 121.1-2).” And then with a great sigh directed towards heaven Jesus’ prayer almost becomes visible. “Be opened!” The man knows what Jesus is doing. He can see it. He can’t hear it, but he can see it. With his spirit he trusts.

“Be opened.”

Jesus has opened our hearts through his Word. Through the Gospel Jesus brought us new life, a second birth. It wasn’t easy. It wasn’t automatic. It was a miracle. “For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4.5).” He created light. He created faith in our hearts. Both were mighty acts of power on our Savior’s part. “Be opened!” By the command of the Gospel, the Word gave us the power to obey the command. “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16.31).”

Because God has opened our hearts in faith, our ears are open to God's Word. The sinful human nature says, "Let me give you an earful, God." It then proceeds to instruct God on all his failings and short-comings. By faith our ears are open to God's Word. Our attitude is "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." Or, "Not my will, but thine be done." We follow the Lord's guidance and accept what comes from his loving hands, even when it is hard to understand. Instead of anger towards God, we leave every funeral intent on keeping our trust in God so we can be part of that joyous reunion in heaven. In the second year of COVID we keep fighting the good fight, slogging along, doing what they tell us is the right thing to do, because, well, they are the authorities we are supposed to honor, serve and obey, and besides, we've got to earn a living instead of reading every article on the internet. We do our best with the limitations so much a part of human life. Islam claims to be the religion of submission though its adherents fly airplanes into skyscrapers. What god demands that? Christianity really is the religion of submission to God's will. Instead of explosives we resort to evangelism. Instead of persecution, we rely on prayer.

Jesus told us "Be opened." We are open and hear the Word of God.

Be opened to speak.

"Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well.' They said. 'He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak (36-37).'"

Now I thought we were supposed to talk up Jesus. Isn't that what the Second Commandment tells us—pray, praise and give thanks? Yes, but this is now and that was then. At that point in his ministry Jesus wanted people to follow him as a teacher, not as a miracle worker. You know how that goes. Some people are celebrities just because they are famous. They have no talent, but people eat up everything their publicists throw out there. After not too long they get irritating. The only reason many are following them is because watching a train wreck in slow motion is fascinating. Then there are people who are famous because they are talented and actually help people. Those are the kinds of people we would pay money to hear in concert even if they were in wheelchairs. Those are the people whose deaths we mourn because they did a lot of good.

If people were following Jesus purely for the miracles they were turning him into a cast member of Jersey Shore. Jesus wanted them to follow him for his teachings—then they would know the way to heaven through faith in his death on the cross. But the people were so thrilled by what Jesus had done for the deaf and mute man that they couldn't help talking it up. It was understandable. These things happen.

Now that Jesus has ascended into heaven, he has given us a different command. “Preach the good news to all creation.” That’s why we are here today. We want to speak the word to somebody besides our pooch sleeping next to the television screen while we watch the service online. We want to be here for each other. We want to encourage our Sunday School staff to boldly go into their classrooms trusting in Jesus for personal protection for them and for their students, as well as trusting the Holy Spirit will empower them to teach the Word of God in its truth and purity and that their students might grow in grace and knowledge. We want to show the world we stand up for Jesus, especially on Sunday morning. I have to admit, on Saturdays, I feel like I’ve had the wind knocked out of me. I only see the failures of the week, the heartbreak. Sickness strikes a young mother. A tragic accident claims the life of a father. Evangelism appointments are broken. I throw away Bible class material never used because so few attended. I answer phone calls asking if we are finally open for worship—“Yes, since May 31, 2020.” But among you, here, today, none of that matters. I am not alone with my thoughts, my frustrations, my snarkiness. I am in the presence Jesus. He promised he would be wherever two or three are gathered in his name. Jesus is here. I am having an audience with the King of kings and Lord of lords. And what is his message to me and you? “Be opened!” By the power of the Holy Spirit my eyes are open to the goodness, the goodness of our God. By the Holy Spirit’s gifts my heart is open to the love of my forgiving God as I forget the grudges and hard feelings. The Spirit opens my lips to sing his praise, opens my mouth to proclaim his Word. God opens my life to go into the battlefield of this world confident that you are fighting the same battles I am and the Lord is backing you up as powerfully as he is backing me up. Woe be gone! We’ve got sunshine, on a cloudy day!

Jesus is among us with his forgiving power. As he commanded our hearts to be opened in faith, he commands our lips to be opened in praise.

Be Opened!

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2. To speak (36-37).

Every time the devil has attacked God’s church on earth, he has failed. The Lord restored Adam and Eve with the promise of a Savior. The Lord brought his Old Testament people back from exile. He rescued the baby Jesus from murderous King Herod. The devil couldn’t kill Christians fast enough, couldn’t burn Bibles quick enough to stop the spread of the Gospel. He couldn’t distract people long enough for the Gospel to pass them by. Every second he loses another person because they become a believer.

Let’s not break his streak. Be opened to bravely believe and proudly proclaim God’s Word.