Questions for Reflection:
Do people who have faith seek for miracles in a different way from people who lack it? What are the differences and are they important?

22. Mark 7:1–30

And the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered by him. And they saw that some of his students were eating bread with defiled hands, (that is unwashed)—for Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands to the wrist, since they keep the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash, and there are many other things which they accept and keep, the washing of cups and pitchers and kettles—and the Pharisees and scribes asked him, “Why don’t your students walk in accordance with the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with defiled hands?” But he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me. In vain they worship me, since they teach human commandments.’ Forsaking God’s commandment, you hold on to human tradition.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting God’s commandment to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother shall surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a person says to father or mother, “Corban” (that is, whatever you would have profited from me is a “gift”), you no longer let them do anything for father or mother. You invalidate God’s word by your tradition which you hand on; and you do many such similar things!” (7:1–13).
And he summoned the crowd back and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand! There is nothing from outside which can defile by going into a person, but the things which come out of a person are what defile them.” And when he went into a house away from the crowd, his students asked him about the figure of speech. And he said to them, “So are you too without understanding? Do you not realize that nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile them? Because it does not go into their heart but into their stomach and goes out into the toilet.” (He was declaring that all foods are clean.) And he said, “What comes out of a person, that defiles the person. For from within, from people’s heart, come wicked doubts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, maliciousness, deceit, debauchery, an evil eye, slander, arrogance, foolishness; all these wicked things come out from within and defile a person” (7:14—23).

And he rose and went away from there into the territory of Tyre and went into a house, and he did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But at once a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him and came and fell at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophoenician by nationality. And she kept asking him to drive out the demon from her daughter. And he said to her, “Let the children first be fed, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said to him in reply, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat from the children’s crumbs.” And he said to her, “On account of this saying, go, the demon has departed from your daughter.” And she went away to her house and found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone (7:24-30).

At first glance these two pieces of tradition have little in common. Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees concerning eating with defiled hands seems unrelated to Jesus performing an exorcism in response to the urging of a foreign woman.

Mark’s version of the confrontation with the Pharisees makes it clear he was writing primarily for Gentiles. Not only does Mark interrupt the traditional narrative to explain that “defiled” means “unwashed,” but he also goes on to detail a
host of other customs which he apparently thought “all the Jews” keep.

Because he was writing for Gentiles, Mark must have felt the story of the Syrophoenician woman needed careful handling. His readers might easily take offense at Jesus calling Gentiles “dogs” and initially refusing to aid a Gentile woman. Moreover, they might also conclude that Jesus’ message was not really for them. Significantly, Mark carefully includes the word first in Jesus’ statement about feeding the children and thus makes it clear that Jesus always envisioned that his message would reach the pagans in due course.

By juxtaposing the two pieces of tradition, Mark stresses to his readers that Jesus did not consider the Gentile woman or Gentile food to be dirty. In the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus insists that externals do not make someone unclean. There is nothing from outside that defiles a person, and then Mark makes the parenthetical comment that, therefore, “all foods are clean.” The gospel emphasizes that this message is for the reader by having Jesus summon the crowd and challenge them all to understand.

The Gentile woman was justified by her persistent faith. In the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees, Jesus insists that the only thing that can defile a person is what comes from the heart. Subsequently, Jesus challenges the Gentile woman, and she replies by showing both humility and persistent trust. In the presence of Jesus, she modestly accepts his criticism that she is a “dog,” yet she persists in pressing her request. Jesus then grants it and notes that he does so because of what she has just said. Significantly, Jesus merely assures the woman that the demon has left her daughter. Initially, there is no proof. It is because of her great faith in Jesus’ power and truthfulness that the woman can accept his word and depart. Only then does she gain confirmation that the exorcism has indeed taken place.

By contrast, Mark suggests that lack of faith defiles the Pharisees. Outwardly, they maintain the highest standard of
cleanliness. Indeed, Mark implies they go too far! However, they are utterly hypocritical and wicked. Significantly, at the end of the story we have a list of vices, and the first and the last both suggest stupid unbelief. Thus, the list begins with “wicked doubts” and ends with “foolishness.” The real error of the Pharisees is that they do not believe in Jesus.

Once again, Jesus does not hesitate to work a miracle for someone who is not a disciple once the outsider has shown she has faith. At the beginning of the story about the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus is trying to hide. When the woman finds him, he initially refuses to work a miracle. Then, however, the woman, by her persistence in pressing her request, shows she truly believes in Jesus. Hence, he works the miracle, and, as we would expect from previous stories, Jesus does not ask the woman to keep the matter secret.

This section continues the theme that Jesus’ students are failing to grasp his message and so are becoming no better than outsiders. Jesus’ public teaching about true purity seems clear, and he apparently expects the crowd to be able to grasp it. Indeed, he issues the challenge, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand!” Yet, the disciples must privately ask for clarification. Before giving it, Jesus underlines their lack of comprehension. “So are you too without understanding?”

Questions for Reflection:

Do religious people today still sometimes assume that externals are what make someone unclean? What are some examples of such externals? What makes someone’s inner self clean or unclean?
23. Mark 7:31–37

And he came back out of the territory of Tyre and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the middle of the territory of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and speech-impaired and begged him to lay his hand on him. And he took him aside, away from the crowd, and privately he thrust his fingers into his ears and spat and touched his tongue, and looking up into heaven, he groaned and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened up!” And at once, his hearing was opened, and the bond of his tongue was undone, and he spoke normally. And he ordered them to talk to no one. Yet the more he ordered them, the more abundantly they proclaimed it. And they were utterly astounded and said, “He has done all things well. He both makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak” (7:31–37).

This story suffers from a major inconsistency, which probably is due to Mark himself. In the narrative, Jesus works the miracle after taking the deaf man “aside”; yet we then read, “He ordered them to talk to no one.” Who this “them” is remains unclear. Since the command to talk to no one is an ongoing theme in this gospel, we may suppose that Mark added it and so produced the contradiction.

Because of the inconsistency, Mark is able to stress both that Jesus worked the miracle in private and that the public acclaimed him. Indeed, Mark makes both points emphatically. Jesus “took him aside, away from the crowd, and privately he thrust his fingers into his ears.” “And they were utterly astounded and said, ‘He has done all things well.’”

This story once again makes the point that Jesus tries to hide miracles when there is no faith or when the miracle itself produces public acclaim. In the narrative, Mark emphasizes Jesus’ attempts to hush up the miracle. Not only does Jesus deliberately work the miracle in private; in addition, he orders people “to talk to no one.” Nevertheless, they break faith with
him utterly. "The more he ordered them" not to talk about what happened, the more they proclaim it. The news, as it spreads, produces not faith, but astonishment, and with the astonishment comes public acclaim.

Nevertheless, the story introduces a new theme, namely, that Jesus' miracles are beginning to diminish due to the persistent lack of faith. Earlier we noted that this theme is foreshadowed in Jesus' inability to do many miracles at Nazareth when his childhood acquaintances dismiss him as no one special (6:1–6). Now we have the beginning of a sustained presentation. From here on, with only one exception, Jesus either will have more difficulty performing the miracles or the miracles will be less spectacular—or both. In this opening story, Jesus has to strain to accomplish the healing. Whereas in the previous narrative, Jesus heals the Syrophoenician woman's daughter effortlessly and at a distance, now he must thrust his fingers into the man's ears, touch his tongue with saliva, and utter the mysterious word, Ephphatha. The miracle apparently also involves inner struggle. Jesus looks into heaven and groans.

Questions for Reflection:

What is the difference between a Christian faith healer and a successful psychic healer or even a charlatan? Would someone who lacks faith and hears about a Christian healer be in a position to grasp the difference? Do you think that many of the people who heard about Jesus' miracles mistook him for a sorcerer? If so, would they have tried to become his followers? What would Jesus have said to such people?