

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

(Mark 7:24–30)

Introduction

This event occurs in the wider context of the question concerning ceremonial uncleanness. As we learned previously, the Pharisees had entrenched a culture in which tradition trumped truth. Though they had the word of God, the word of man ruled their lives (vv. 8–13). What a tragedy.

Israel was blessed with wonderful privilege as the chosen nation of God. It was not because of anything that they had done but simply because God had chosen to love them (Deuteronomy 7:6–9) and to use them in his quest to establish his kingdom on earth, where his name would be hallowed, and where his will would be obeyed as it is in heaven.

Paul highlights these privileges in Romans 9:4–5. They included adoption as God's children; the abiding presence of God's Shekinah glory; the establishment of a covenant so relationship; the giving of his law, which established them as a nation with good governance; true worship, centred on the tabernacle and the temple, which provided access to God; messianic promises; the patriarchs, to whom were given God's promises; and, ultimately, Jesus Christ, the culmination of all privileges.

Yet, despite these privileges, as Paul highlights, the majority still were not saved (10:1). For this reason, Paul had continual and great sorrow for this people. In fact, reminiscent of Moses, Paul was willing to be accursed himself that they might be blessed with the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ alone (Romans 9:3; Exodus 32:30–34).

How sad. Squandered privilege is always a travesty and often a tragedy. How sad it is when people throw away an education by a slothful life. What a tragedy it is when people forfeit health for temporary pleasures. How terrible when people neglect gifts and talents, or

misuse wealth in self when it could be invested on others. In the church, how scandalous it is to witness the fall of an elder or the backsliding of a church member.

Like Israel, we all face the awful temptation to neglect our God-given privileges. It is for this reason this story of the Syrophenician woman stands out so dramatically. This woman had very little privilege and yet took advantage of—in fact, created—an opportunity to be privileged.

In other words, while Jewish people had been provided loaves of privilege, nevertheless, for the most part they neglected them, if not outright despised them. Yet this woman appreciated the crumbs of privilege. The Lord commended her for this.

As we learned previously, this woman delighted the Lord by her response to him. And she, of course, was delighted by his response to her. The Lord commended her for her persistent, persevering, undeterred confidence in what he could do. Her response to Jesus stands in stark contrast with the response of those more privileged. As John Calvin notes, “This commendation, bestowed on a woman who had been a heathen, condemns the ingratitude of that nation which boasted that it was consecrated to God.” Ouch. We should consider this contrast, because the Lord has blessed us with loaves of privilege.

In this study, I want to help us to appreciate our immense gospel privileges in order that we will steward them well.

A Missed Opportunity

The text opens on a sad note: “He arose and went away” (v. 24). As we saw previously, the tense of the words indicates a decisive departure. It is as though Jesus had had enough of these unfaithful shepherds of God’s people. And, no doubt, Jesus was disturbed that his disciples just did not get it!

This introduction to the passage before us, on the heels of the passage that precedes it, indicates how Jesus Christ, who is King, might respond to those who neglect their privileges. Those who are given much, and yet who are poor stewards of the much they are given, might experience Jesus departing from them.

The religious elite, as well as many of those whom they were leading, missed out on the opportunity to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ. And there were times that, in response to their unbelief, Jesus arose and went away (see 6:6). Jesus will not stay forever where he is not wanted. These people in Galilee missed their opportunity to embrace the promised Messiah. In fact, from this point on, Jesus would not spend a lot of time there. What a tragic travesty.

You might think that such a statement is intended to frighten the passively complacent and the passively indolent. And you would be correct. Such a truth is frightening to those who have ears to hear and a heart to understand. And yet, all too often we are like those depicted in the next story: deaf and mute. Be careful.

We too can miss our opportunity to experience the mercies and grace of the Lord. We too can miss our opportunity to know him.

Don't neglect your privileged opportunity for personal devotions and corporate Lord's Day worship. Don't neglect your opportunity to gather in small groups for fellowship and edification. Don't miss the opportunity to gather with the church on special occasions to worship God together. Take every opportunity to obey him and follow promptings to pray.

The point is, we neglect our spiritual privileges to our detriment, and sometimes to the detriment of others. If we neglect our loaves of privileges, we may find ourselves spiritually malnourished if not starving.

A Created Opportunity

As Jesus left Galilee and came into Tyre and Sidon, this Syrophenician woman "fell down at his feet" (v. 25).

This woman heard that Jesus was in town and that he was at a certain house. She chose to make the most of her opportunity. She chose to take advantage of an opportunity. Better yet, she apparently did what was necessary to create an opportunity. Though she was an outsider to the privileges of Israel – an outsider to the privileges of being one of the children of God – yet she was determined to do all she could to overcome such disadvantage. She would not accept the status quo of Jewish privilege. If they could have loaves of privilege, then she was determined to have at least the crumbs of privilege. We know this because she crashed a dinner party!

Again, we don't know if she knew those in this household, but we do know that she was willing to invite herself near the table and to speak with the one who was both Guest and Master of it.

The adage "God helps those who help themselves" is just that: an adage. It is not a Bible verse. This adage can be very deceiving – damningly so. For instance, if someone thinks that he will be saved both by God's grace and his own works, he has been deceived. On the other hand, God does expect for us to seek his face and, when we do, he will be found. This woman illustrates this very well.

Though she asked only for crumbs, she received a whole lot more. Humanly speaking, this would not have occurred if she had not taken initiative, which created an opportunity to receive help from the Lord.

We too need to do something if we will experience many of the privileges of God and of his grace.

Moses had to lift his rod and take a step before the Red Sea divided. The disciples had to tell the crowd to sit down and they had to pass the bread and fish for them to multiply. The disciples had to launch out into the deep before they would fill their boats with fish. Paul and Barnabas had to be sent out, and then to go out and face risks and preach the gospel, if churches would be planted. Peter had to stand up and open his mouth if Pentecostal conversions would take place. Epaphroditus would have to risk his life if Paul would receive the gift from the Philippian church. The Macedonians would need to give of their material substance if they would experience the grace of giving. And, as Jesus taught, sometimes we must pray and fast if we will experience God's power of deliverance (9:28–29).

In each of these instances, faith was active, not passive. It was because these individuals did something that they found themselves in situations in which they experienced the gracious privileges of God and of his grace.

Beware the wrongheaded teaching of passivity. A simple reading of Hebrews 11 reveals that the blessings of God are most often experienced in the context of faith-filled activity. This woman realised that, though she was not privileged as were those who were sitting around the table, she was privileged to have access to Jesus if she would only act upon it. The same is true of you and I. Though we may feel at times that others have some spiritual privileges that we do not have (godly parents, godly heritage of a biblical church, etc.), nevertheless we can all take initiatives that will put us in the path of potential blessings.

After I had finished preaching recently, a man came up to me and thanked me for the word. When I asked his name, I immediately recognised it as the son of a pastor for whom we as a church had prayed more than 25 years ago. He had been diagnosed with leukaemia and given two weeks to live. God had miraculously healed him. Over the years, he admitted that he had wasted his God-given privileges, but God has started to grip his heart and remind him of those privileges. I pray that he will not waste them any further.

Again, this is not an appeal to merely lift ourselves by our own bootstraps; rather, it is in accordance with the teaching of Philippians 2:12–13, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Note that Paul expected these believers to do something in response to God's initiative. As we saw previously, this woman was in the right place in the right time because God destined her to be. "God is always previous," as Tozer loved to say. He takes the initiative. And he also empowers us to persevere. But in none of this are merely passive robots. We respond to God's work and then we see him work in even more wonderful ways.

Like the above, we need to take initiative if we will experience God. As William Carey said, "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." This woman was Exhibit A.

We need to take initiative to have a daily time in God's word. Often, this leads to an opportunity to experience profoundly helpful insight, conviction, repentance and/or encouragement.

We need to take the initiative to drop to our knees and pray when that thought crosses our mind.

We need to take initiative to show up for the spiritual meals that are available. If you don't come to the Table, don't be surprised when you find yourself spiritually starved. If you are nowhere near where the meal is being served, most likely you will be equally cut off from any crumbs that might have helped you.

We need to take initiative to raise a godly seed. Make opportunities to teach your children the gospel and to point them to Christ (see Deuteronomy 6:4–6).

We need to take the initiative to increase our faith by devoting ourselves to God's word.

A Rare and Gracious Opportunity

The phrase, "Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth" (v. 26) helps us to understand just how rare, how unique and undeserved and amazing this opportunity was.

She was a Gentile religiously, which means that she was a pagan worshipper. She was a true religious outsider as far as the Jewish nation was concerned. She had little hope of being blessed by a Jewish Messiah.

Being from this region, she would have been surrounded by the false religions of Baal and Ashtoreth. Living in Tyre, she reminds us of the likes of Jezebel who hailed from there. This was not a region friendly to the grace of God; it was not a region privileged like Capernaum. This makes this scene all the more remarkable.

Everything was against her having access to the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet she had access. He came to her town and she came to him.

Again, as we saw previously, this woman faced about every disadvantage possible. That is, to the Jewish mindset of that day, she was as unclean as the unwashed and therefore defiled hands of the disciples (vv. 1–5). In such a religious culture, she was beyond redemption and so was her daughter. She was up against demons and discrimination. She faced discouragement by Jesus, who seemingly ignored her, and by his disciples, who sought to dismiss her (Matthew 15:23). She was disadvantaged from having a biblical heritage. She may have been a destitute widow. She was living in a region whose destruction had been prophesied. In fact, being a Canaanite (Matthew 15:22), she was from a people whom God had commanded the Jews to exterminate from the land.

In every way it seemed as though she was destined to being cut off from the blessings of God and therefore cut off from the ministry of God's Messiah.

If anyone could legitimately argue that they were disadvantaged – if any one was in the position to observe the reality of Jewish privilege – it was this unnamed woman. And yet none of this derailed her from pursuing the opportunity to gain the access she so desperately desired.

Again, let's harken back to Matthew 15, where Jesus responded to her plea, after his silence, with these words to his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24). For most people, this would have been the end of the matter. But not for her. She would not take no for an answer. Why was this?

We don't know all the human reasons, but certainly she displayed a disposition of desperation, and I believe that underlying this was the dynamic of God's sovereign grace.

God had put things in place for her to have this opportunity for access. God graciously ordered Jesus' steps (Psalm 37:23) to come to her town and she took advantage of this gracious opportunity. In other words, God granted her an inestimable privilege and she stewarded it well.

We need to often reflect on God's provision of gracious privileges to us. And then we need to act on these, to steward them – and steward them well.

Shortly after my dad died, my mom asked if I would like his ring. My dad was a big man, and the ring was too big for me. I wore it for a while even though it was too large, but it would often fall off when I would put my hand in a bag or something. Though it is an inexpensive ring, it has great sentimental value, and I did not want to squander it by losing it somewhere. Realising that something needed to be done, I was presented with the perfect opportunity when one of my daughters asked what I wanted for Christmas. I asked to have the ring resized, and today it fits me perfectly. It was a small opportunity for me to steward well a gift my mom (and dad) had given me.

This was not the first Syrophoenician woman to receive grace from God. In the Old Testament, there was a widowed woman, a single mother, who was gathering firewood to make one last meal in a time of severe drought, before her and her son starved. They, as it were, were down to crumbs.

In the meantime, Elijah was compelled to leave the region where God had miraculously provided for him and to head to the very place where this woman was gathering sticks. When he asked for some food, she explained her dilemma. Incredibly, he asked her to make him a meal first. Even more incredibly, she did so. God then miraculously sustained her supply of oil and flour for the duration of the drought so that she never faced a dreaded last meal again. Her great faith was rewarded by loaves of blessing.

Interestingly, her son subsequently died, and the Lord graciously raised him back to life. Her faith was strengthened and the Lord was glorified.

There are some interesting parallels here.

The greatest parallel is that, in both cases, these women responded in faith and their faith was rewarded. In both cases, they were covenantal outsiders and yet the Lord blessed them. In both cases, their stories are recorded and preserved to teach us that God's grace is not limited to a particular people, but rather his saving grace is for all peoples. And in both cases, these stories reveal the contrast between those who neglected their privileges with those who made the most of them (see Luke 4:23–26). Thankfully, though it seems at times that such demonstrations of God's grace are rare, they occur over and over again. You see, these are not the only records of God's grace to this region, for in the book of Acts we read of what must have been a local church planted there (21:3–4).

If we respond like these all did, then such stories will not be as rare as otherwise they might be. God offers his grace to us; how will we respond? Let's respond like these women did.

Perhaps our problem is that we take his grace for granted. Philip Yancey wrote a book called, *What's so Amazing about Grace?* He wrote it to point the reader to just how amazing it is! James Boice wrote a book titled, *Putting the Amazing Back into Grace*. Both books address the reality that, as Christians, we lose sight of the immensity, the uniqueness, yes, the amazingness of grace. And when that happens, we will take Jesus and the gospel and all its attendant blessings for granted. The consequence is that, like the Pharisees, and even like these first disciples, we miss opportunities to experience the power of the Lord.

This mother made the most of her opportunity. She took advantage of the gracious privilege the Lord provided her. Do we? Will we?

Before we move to some important relevant application to challenge us respond to our privileges, we need to address one final point.

A Fruitful Opportunity

The text informs us that, in response to Jesus' seemingly off-putting words about it not being right for food to be given to dogs (v. 27), this desperate and yet faithful mother proved her spiritual insight when she said, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (v. 28). And what was Jesus' response to her faith? He gave her what she requested. The fruit of her faith was that the demon left her daughter (vv. 29–30).

What we don't want to miss is that this disadvantaged woman was the first individual in the Gospel of Mark to understand one of Jesus' parables. When Jesus said, "For this statement you may go your way," he was acknowledging this. He was saying, "Ah, you get it! You understand who I am and why I have come. You understand, at least to some degree, that Israel comprises the children of God, and therefore they have been covenantally privileged, but you also understand that my Messianic blessings flow as far as the curse is found."

This non-Jewish, outside-the-covenant woman understood what the nation of Israel should have understood: that Jesus Christ is King, has brought into this world his kingdom, and proof of this is his casting out demons (Mark 3:22–27; Matthew 12:22–32). Whereas the disciples were so spiritually dull that they thought straightforward words were a parable (vv. 17–18), this woman was able to see through Jesus' words as not offensive but parabolic. She heard more than met the ear. She did not hear rejection; she heard invitation.

Perhaps it was the phrase, "Let the children be fed *first*" that gave her the insight. This implies order of priority rather than cessation of opportunity. The children being fed first was just that: the beginning of others also being fed.

Paul, of course, understood this when he wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

It has been correctly observed by many that Jesus never had a mission to the Gentiles during his earthly sojourn (despite headings in many Bibles!). Though his redemptive work would indeed effect all the world, he first had to fulfil God's promises to Israel. The original children of God were to be offered the bread first, and then the rest of the world. Today there is no such distinction (Ephesians 2–3). This is all very good news for us, since most reading this are probably not Jewish. Thankfully, we have received not merely crumbs, but the whole loaf of the Bread of Life. "A breakthrough has been made. Her daughter is healed. Gentiles are included in the kingdom of God being established by Jesus" (English). As France points out, "The whole future course of the Christian movement is set not on the basis of Jewish exclusivism but of sharing the 'children's bread'."

Though I agree with commentators that, in one sense, this was a witty response, nevertheless, it was much more than that. She was granted spiritual understanding. She was given ears to hear and a heart to understand. Her response displays spiritual wisdom. Like Peter in a later account, she was enabled by God to make a confession of faith, and she and her daughter experienced the fruit of such faith.

Again, we are confronted here with a real life illustration of someone who was granted the privilege to grasp God's grace and did so. She was wise in her stewardship of spiritual privilege. This resulted in wonderful fruit.

So it will be for you and me, if we too are faithful stewards of our spiritual privilege. And this brings us to our final point, which is the application of this truth.

Our Opportunity

There is clear indication that Mark is contrasting those who did not faithfully steward their opportunities and privileges with those who did do so—both here and in the story that follows. This text clearly speaks to us about our privilege and responsibility.

Let's take a practical look at what stewarding our God-given privileges to experience and enjoy his blessings looks like. Let's also look at the practical effect if we fail to do so.

We need to seriously consider the outcome of responding faithfully to the gracious privilege of access to the Lord and to his gospel: our access to the word of God and the gospel therein; our access to the means of grace; our access to membership in a biblically faithful local church; our access to gospel freedom and sound teaching in our country; our access as a recipient of God's grace in the gospel. How sad it is that many are raised in a faithful Christian home by godly parents and yet reject the truth of God. How sad it is that many are members of biblically faithful local churches, yet sit sceptically, if not cynically, on the sidelines, refusing to grow in grace.

Pass the Bread

It is to be observed that those who have received such loaves of privilege need to be aware of those who have not. And the overflow of our blessings (in a sense, the crumbs, though not in a derogatory way) are to be shared with others. Let us be reminded that what Jesus said—"let the children be fed first"—leaves the door wide open for all to have access to the meal that God has provided.

Our finances, once they have provided our own needs, should provide for the aid of others, particularly for the household of faith and the spread of the gospel. Our knowledge is to be passed on to those who need more. Our maturity must be used to help mature others. Our

victories over sin are to be used to bless others. Our gifts and talents are to be used to bless others.

Failed Stewardship

But, we also need to seriously consider the outcome of our failure to respond faithfully to the gracious privilege of access to the Lord and to his gospel. We can be so close to the gospel of Jesus Christ and yet completely miss it. I recently had lunch with a former church member in London, and he was telling me about the Salvation Army headquarters in that city. I wondered how many people will pass that place without any thought of God and their standing before them. In spite of the likes of William Booth, a man who was willing to give his all for the salvation of lost sinners, so many rejected and continue to reject their only hope.

Conclusion

Christian, let us thank God for his loaves of privileges. But let us do what we should with them: respond faithfully, steward them well. They have not come to us cheaply. Rather, there was an immeasurable cost for us to have these privileges: the cross of Christ. Jesus, the Bread for the children, was willing to be treated worse than a dog in order to feed us (Psalm 22:16).

We need to remember something very essential to Mark's Gospel (as is true of all the Gospels): Jesus Christ was the true Israel. He was the perfect, "ideal" Israel. That is, he was the perfectly faithful, perfectly obedient, perfectly law-keeping Son of God (cf. Exodus 4:22–23). So, when he referred to "the children" (that is, Israel) he was referring also and ultimately to himself. He was the one who would bless those under the table. He was the one who, after first offering the Bread of Life to the nation of Israel, would offer himself to the world.

As we saw earlier, this woman was not the first Gentile woman to receive God's grace, and neither was she the last. Multitudes of Gentile women, Gentile men, and Gentile children have experienced the saving grace of God throughout the subsequent centuries. Jesus did come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But this was so that he could come to all houses (see John 12:20–26).

Jesus once informed Philip that the Gentiles would see Jesus, but only after — like a grain of wheat — he dies. Then he would bring forth much more fruit.

It is interesting that bread in those days was composed of wheat. Jesus was saying to Philip, "I am the Bread for the world (John 6:47–51), but the world will need to wait until I am dead, buried and then risen again. Then this message will go forth!"

Loaves of Privilege

Mark 7:24–30

Doug Van Meter

What does this say to you and me? That because Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world, because he paid the penalty in the place of hell-deserving sinners, we can all have, not merely crumbs, but the whole loaf of him who is the Bread of Life. We can experience deliverance from our sins and from the rupture that sin has caused between man and God, between man and man, and between man and the creation.

What stands between the possibility of this and the experience of this is our response: Will we repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? If we do, then we will be given loaves of privileges. As Alan Cole helpfully summarises, “God’s abundance for his children was so rich that even the total outsider could share in it. It was a great Old Testament truth that in Abraham, and therefore in Israel, all nations would be blessed ultimately (Gen. 22:18): she claimed this.” May God grant us the grace to do so today.

Non-Christian, these privileges can be yours if, like this woman, you humble yourself before holy God, confess you are a sinner, repent of your sins, and plead with God for crumbs of compassion. He will give you loaves of blessings for he will give you his Son, the Bread of Life.

AMEN