

Be Opened

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The expression “Be Opened” is found in one of our New Testament scriptures, where Jesus heals a man who is deaf mute and he commands the man’s ears to “be opened”.

Literary and Narrative Context

This passage is from Mark’s gospel and seems to be found only there – though many occurrences of Jesus healing deaf people can be found elsewhere in the Gospels. So a few words about Mark’s Gospel.

Mark’s Gospel

It is believed that it was the first one to be written. Matthew and Luke used Mark’s gospel as a basis and added content based on oral tradition, as well as

- their own knowledge (in the case of Matthew, who was one of Jesus’ 12 disciples), or
- intentional research (in the case of Luke).

What is interesting about Mark’s Gospel, though, is that there is a lot of action and little oral teaching. You will not find, for example, the Sermon on the Mount or most of the very rich parables found in the other gospels.

So, oftentimes, it is important to pay attention to what Jesus *does* as opposed to what he *says*. I’ll come back to that...

The Syrophenician Woman’s Faith (Mark 7:24-30)

If we look at the more narrow narrative context of our scripture, we find that Jesus has travelled northward from Galilee to the region of Tyre. There he comes across a Gentile woman, who asks Him to cure her daughter. And he answers her in a way that – to me at least – appears to be somewhat insensitive, comparing the woman and her daughter to... dogs: « *It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs* » (Mark 7:27).

Now, I don’t know about you, but I’ve always find this apparent callousness very surprising. This does not sound at all like the Jesus I know, the Jesus I read about in the rest of the gospels.

Commentators have proposed various explanations for this. For example:

- that the woman understands what “dogs” refer to: a metaphor for Gentiles as opposed to Jews, who are “children” - and therefore does not consider it a slur; or
- that Jesus is actually testing her, and – possibly – knows in advance how she is going to respond. That’s why he acts that way.

I’m not sure I am convinced by these explanations but, in any case, the woman gives an answer to Jesus’ liking and he heals her daughter.

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man (Mark 7:31-37)

Then, Jesus travels further up north to Sidon, then comes back south towards the Sea of Galilee, and people bring him a deaf man to be healed. Mark tells us that Jesus puts his fingers into his ears, spits, and touches the man’s tongue with his own saliva.

Again, this may seem like strange behaviour, and commentators have various explanations for it. For example:

- that, at the time, saliva was believed to be remedial; or
- that Jesus’ action are designed to evoke in the man the co-operation of faith

And this is where Jesus, looking up to heaven, says [to the man]: ‘*Ephphatha*’ [...] ‘*Be opened.*’ And the man is healed.

Application

How can we apply this in our lives today? After all, as much as we’d like to miraculously cure deaf people, we do not have Jesus’ healing power.

But I’m going to take a leap and propose that maybe we can apply the expression “be opened” metaphorically. And I know it’s an easy way out, but on the other hand, I believe the text itself – if we consider what happens before and after – leads us there.

As I said earlier, when reading Mark’s gospel, we should be attentive to Jesus’ actions, since there is very little oral teaching. And, more precisely, how his behaviour may change over time, following certain events.

Jesus being “opened”

We have seen that, in his encounter with the Gentile mother, Jesus appeared to be rather callous. Then he heals the deaf man and, if we were to keep on reading in Mark, we would see that his next move is to miraculously feed 4,000 people. And

just before doing so – indicating his motivation for performing that miracle – he tells his disciples: “*I have compassion for the crowd*” (Mark 8:2).

Is it possible that Jesus learned something in his encounter with the pagan woman? Perhaps on account of her clever answer?

The Bible tells us that Jesus never *sinned*... which applies to his encounter with the Gentile mother, regardless of how we may find his behaviour disturbing. But that doesn't mean he didn't *learn* anything in the process. There are Scriptures – in Luke (2:40; 2:52) and Hebrews (5:8; 9:14), among others – that tell us that Jesus *did* learn things while on earth.

I'm not saying Jesus didn't have any compassion before his encounter with the Gentile mother, but Mark's narrative gives the impression that something did change after this event.

How can I be “opened”?

So, to get back to our question: How do these words apply to me today? How can I be opened? Not “be open”, but “be opened”. “Being open” is a state: I am open (or not) on certain issues. Whereas “being opened” can be seen as a process – possibly an ongoing, continuous thing: I need to “be opened” to become more “open”.

So how can I become “more open” in my life? How can I “be opened”? I guess it is something we have to meditate on individually, but I'll give an example to illustrate:

Progressives and conservatives

I just mentioned the difference between “being open” (state) and “being opened” (process). As a progressive Christian, I consider myself to be open – much more so than, say, more conservative Christians. But, if this is the case, I am already “open” and in no need to be “opened”. And there is a risk in that: the risk of remaining self-satisfied in my “openness”. And not following Jesus, not imitating Jesus, not allowing myself to “be opened”.

I have mentioned a couple of explanations as to why Jesus appears to be callous in that episode with the Gentile mother. These explanations, though valid (that is, entirely possible), are not found in the text itself. They are interpretations. Let me propose my own interpretation, which is not found in the text either but, as far as I can see, is supported by the text.

I believe Jesus' theology was challenged by the woman's answer. His theology involved him being sent to (and for) the children of Israel – not to and for the “dogs”. No need, then, to perform miracles for pagans – the “dogs”. But in the

woman's response, he may have found faith or wisdom or – I don't know what – that was unknown to Him: that is, pagans (or at least some of them) can show as much faith or wisdom as the children of Israel. So Jesus learned something: he was "opened", so to speak.

And here is how the distinction between "being open" as a state and "being opened" as a process is useful, I believe.

Wherever I find myself on the theological spectrum (right, left or centre), I can always be "opened". Not necessarily in the sense of moving from the right to the left (although this is certainly a possibility), but in the sense of being more open to the person who holds an opinion different than mine. Not necessarily agreeing with his or her position: as a progressive Christian, I don't think I could go back to some more conservative opinions on certain issues.

But being open to the person – trying to understand why he or she believes differently on this or that issue. And doing so not necessarily to convince him or her to see things my way. But to better understand and love that person, that Christian brother or sister who believes differently. And, for that matter, that non-Christian person also created in God's image – like the Gentile mother in our story. And, maybe, along the way, I'll learn something. I'll be "opened", so to speak.

After all, if Jesus, being who He was, agreed to see things differently, who am I to think that I can't learn anything from somebody with whom I disagree. Even – and maybe especially – on theological issues.

Warning against Partiality (James 2:2-9)

Another illustration is provided by our other New Testament scripture for today.

In his epistle, the apostle James warns against showing favouritism towards rich people at the expense of poor people in the Church. In other words, being more open to the rich and less to the poor.

And James tells us to "be opened" (so to speak) towards the poor and stop discriminating. As a matter of fact, he even says that if we show such partiality, we commit sin! (2:9)

A similar point could be made as to clothing.

Many years ago, in a theology class I was attending, an argument broke out as to whether church members should wear their best clothes in Church (like three-piece suits for men), or dress more humbly, as seems to be suggested in Peter's first epistle: "*Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by [...] wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing*" (1 Peter 3:3).

Of course, both sides wanted to honour God and thus, both sides were right even though they came to an opposite conclusion. They just wanted to do it differently. Again, “being opened” to the possibility that the other party may have been well-intentioned would have been helpful. After all, in the very next verse, Peter adds: *“Rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight”* (1 Peter 3:4).

At the time, I was privileged to be in a church where men in three-piece suits worshipped alongside people in jeans, or even bermuda shorts and open-toed sandals. And I thought it was cool!

Conclusion

I could go on and on with illustrations, but you probably can think of some of your own and they’re possibly even better than mine. So, to conclude...

... as we begin a new season, I invite us to try to “be opened” in the next few months. And maybe we’ll learn something along the way.