

Semicontinuous
**Prov. 22:1–2, 8–9,
 22–23**
Ps. 125

Complementary
Isa. 35:4–7a
Ps. 146

Jas. 2:1–10, (11–13,) 14–17
Mark 7:24–37

Breaking Barriers

Goal for the Session *Seeing mercy overcome human boundaries in Mark 7, adults will plan ways to challenge barriers and show mercy.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Mark 7:24–37

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Douglas R. A. Hare

How can Christians appropriate this story? First, it reminds us of our debt to Israel. As Krister Stendahl proposed, in Paul’s view we Gentile Christians must consider ourselves “honorary Jews.” The Gentile woman humbly acknowledges the priority of the “children,” even as she presses her request to be fed from the same table. Second, the woman’s boldness inspires us to be bold in our prayers of intercession and petition. Even though our basic principle is “Your will be done,” we must not prematurely abandon our prayers for healing, thinking they are futile.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Loye Bradley Ashton

To be the Son of God, the Messiah must suffer, not only at the hands of those of us who do not understand him, but also under the conditions of existence, the challenge of the human condition itself. To be otherwise would not allow Jesus to be fully human. Furthermore, according to the tenets of process and liberation theologies, if he is also “fully God,” Jesus cannot avoid this suffering either. Mark provides an interesting way of seeing how the divine and the human can be completely combined in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, a kind of “Ephphatha Christology.” Jesus is fully God and fully human only if he can faithfully “be opened” to both at the same time.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Amy C. Howe

Perhaps it is too much to ask that a homeless person could interrupt the dinner of the president of the United States to ask a favor, but it is not too much to ask humanity to recognize that there are no walls made of withered hands, deaf ears, or troubled minds separating us from God or us from each other. Status is a product of our own imaginations, invisible to God. Once we acknowledge that there are no walls separating us, love and mercy flow unfettered, and all people are deemed equally valuable.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm

Most of us are reluctant to share our faith with others and we find very good reasons to keep quiet: we may believe that our actions speak more loudly than our words, we may be afraid of the inadequacy of our speech, or we may fear that we will make a mistake and alienate those to whom we are speaking. Yet the healed man is every bit as insistent as the Syrophenician woman. He and his companions give voice to God’s presence and power among them. The characters in both stories embolden us to share whatever glimpse of God’s mercy, love, and truth we have witnessed. Their stories and words remind us to focus our attention on God and to keep pointing others toward the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Mark 7:24–37

Focus on Your Teaching

In an ever-shrinking world, we have more opportunities to encounter others different from ourselves. Yet, trouble around the globe and in our cities raises fear and suspicion of those who are not like “us.” In response to fear, barriers are erected to keep out the “other” and to protect ourselves. Gated communities, low-income housing sites and high property costs segregate our cities and towns. Private schools, charter schools and public schools serve to separate our children. Many religious communities are segregated. Such realities keep people apart. Today’s session offers adults a chance to recognize human tendencies to erect barriers and respond to Jesus’ model of challenging barriers and showing mercy.

Help me, O God, to open my arms and welcome those who gather to feast on your Word. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- board or newsprint
- marker
- map of Palestine in the time of Jesus
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, 2015

For Responding

- option 1: newsprint or board, marker, copies of Resource Sheet 1, pens
- option 2: newsprint, marker
- option 3: pens, paper, envelopes, stamps

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, if using option 1 in Responding, write the statements for display on a board or newsprint. If using option 3 in Responding, preview the recommended Web sites for Bread for the World and Amnesty International.

Welcome participants as they arrive and introduce newcomers. Invite people to name various barriers, either physical or relational, that they regularly encounter, such as climbing stairs to enter a building or joining a particular club or group. Challenge them to list barriers that exist in your congregation or church building. After a number of barriers have been named, discuss ways people break down or avoid barriers. Tell participants they will encounter two stories from Mark 7 in which barriers are overcome.

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

Holy God, we gather today seeking your good news. Open to us the mysteries of your mercy. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Outline of Mark’s Gospel) and have participants read the first two paragraphs. Point out the italicized headings on the outline and where today’s focus scripture is found on it. Encourage participants to keep the sheet to use as a reference.

Direct participants to a map of Palestine in the time of Jesus, either in a study Bible or posted on the wall.

Read aloud Mark 7:24 and 7:31. Have participants locate on the map the cities named in the verses. Identify the predominantly Jewish regions of Galilee and Judea, and the

Obvious barriers existed between Jesus and the Syrophenian woman. She was a Gentile woman from a Phoenician city in Syria—the wrong side of the tracks. According to Jewish purity laws, she should not have access to Jesus.

predominantly Gentile regions of Phoenicia and Decapolis. Explain that Jews and Gentiles were allowed to cross boundaries between these areas. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus traveled throughout these regions teaching and healing.

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Mark 7:24–37. Have the group identify the barriers encountered by the Syrophenian woman and the deaf man in the two stories. Discuss whether these were physical, social, or religious barriers.

Focus specifically on the story of the Syrophenian woman in verses 24–30. Invite participants to imagine the woman's feelings as she encountered Jesus. Discuss the clues found in the text that indicate how the women might have felt during the encounter. Ask:

- ✧ What surprises you about Jesus' response?
- ✧ How did the woman challenge the barriers?
- ✧ How was mercy shown?

Most people living during the first century CE viewed illness, physical impairment, and demon possession as consequences of sin. People showing illness or infirmity were often shunned or barred from society.

Call attention to the story of the man who was deaf in verses 31–37. Have a volunteer read the Scripture aloud and invite participants to imagine the man's feelings as he encountered Jesus. Discuss the clues found in the text that indicate how the man felt in his encounter. Ask:

- ✧ How did Jesus' response to the man differ from his response to the Syrophenian woman?
- ✧ How was mercy shown?
- ✧ When healing the deaf man, Jesus said, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." (v. 34) Who or what is opened in this encounter in addition to the man's hearing?
- ✧ Who or what is opened in the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenian woman?

To transition to Responding, distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 7:24–37) and have a volunteer read the "So What?" excerpt. Ask:

- ✧ With these words in mind, how does the church, specifically our congregation, break down barriers and show mercy today?



RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Challenge Barriers and Show Mercy** This activity helps adults identify their feelings about boundaries between people and encourages them to name ways to challenge barriers and show mercy to others.

Display newspaper with the following prepared statements:

- ✧ How does the excerpt challenge barriers today?
- ✧ How can Christians appropriate these stories into daily living?
- ✧ Name one way you will challenge a barrier and show mercy in the next week.

Distribute pens. Have individuals read the "What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Encourage them to circle statements with which they agree and to underline statements that seem uncomfortable. Form pairs to discuss their highlighted statements, acknowledging different feelings that arise from the excerpt.

Remaining in pairs, discuss the posted statements. Have individuals write on their resource sheets what they will do to challenge barriers and show mercy in the next week. Suggest that they take the sheet home and display it as a reminder of their commitment.

- 2. Barriers in Our Community** This activity helps adults name barriers in their local community and identify ways their congregation can show mercy. Challenge the group to list barriers to living well that they see within their community; include physical obstructions as well as social barriers between people. Some barriers might include children sleeping in homes without beds, jobless people gathering on street corners, lack of handicapped parking spaces, or steep inclines and stairs challenging building access. Have a volunteer record these on newsprint.

Review the list and identify ones that your congregation already acts on to reduce or change. Encourage people to get involved in these efforts. Then identify ones your congregation does not challenge or address. As a group, select one barrier that participants can challenge or break down. Brainstorm steps to challenge it, create a timeline for putting the steps into place, and agree on who will make sure the steps are taken. Follow up your progress in the next session.

- 3. Letter Writing** This activity encourages adults to challenge barriers in their community or to raise their voices concerning national or international barriers using a letter-writing campaign. National and international agencies offer resources for letter-writing campaigns from concerned Christians and others wishing to address barriers across the globe. You may wish to share information about letter-writing campaigns from one of the two agencies listed in the sidebar.

Distribute pens, paper, envelopes, and stamps. As an option, provide e-mail addresses and mail contacts for people to write to express their concerns. Work as a group to develop a basic message that calls attention to the barrier(s) participants have identified in their community or in the world. Have participants prepare letters and envelopes for mailing, or encourage them to send e-mail letters at home.

Two groups that provide letter-writing information are Bread for the World, www.Bread.org/go/ol and Amnesty International, www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/campaigns.

CLOSING

Have individuals name one action they will take to challenge a barrier or to show God's mercy in their community.

Say the Lord's Prayer in unison.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, 2015, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Focus on Mark 7:24–37

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Outline of Mark's Gospel

There are various ways to outline this Gospel. The following is an adapted, abbreviated version highlighting upcoming lectionary texts from Mark in the *Interpretation Bible Commentary* by Lamar Williamson Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), vii–ix. Upcoming lessons covered are in italics with the dates that they will be discussed in parenthesis. Please keep this sheet and bring it to class while studying these texts.

Mark is concerned with the kind of Messiah Jesus is and with discipleship appropriate to following him. Mark repeatedly insists (1) that Jesus is the Son of Man who must suffer humiliation and death by human hands, (2) that his followers either would not or could not accept Jesus' divinely appointed mission or its implications for their own, and (3) that Jesus challenged his disciples' confusion with clear instruction, stressing self-sacrificial service in Jesus' name and for the gospel's sake.

Prologue Mark 1:1–13

From the Call of the First Disciples to the Plot of Jesus' Opponents

Mark 1:16–3:6

From the Naming of the Twelve to Rejection by His Own People

Mark 3:7–6:6

From the Sending of the Twelve to Misunderstanding by His Disciples

Mark 6:7–8:21

6:7–13	The Sending of the Twelve
6:14–29	The Death of John the Baptist
6:30–44	The Feeding of the Five Thousand
6:45–56	Walking on Water and Healings at Gennesaret
7:1–23	Controversy About Tradition
7:24–37	<i>The Syrophenician Woman and the Deaf-mute of the Decapolis (September 6)</i>
8:1–21	The Feeding of the Four Thousand: "Do You Not Yet Understand?"

Discipleship: The Way of Jesus Mark 8:22–10:52

8:22–26	The Blind Man of Bethsaida
8:27–38	<i>Caesarea Philippi: First Passion Prediction (September 13)</i>
9:2–13	The Transfiguration
9:14–29	The Boy the Disciples Could Not Heal
9:30–37	<i>Capernaum: Second Passion Prediction (September 20)</i>
10:2–16	<i>Teachings About Marriage and About Children (October 4)</i>
10:17–31	<i>Teaching About Riches (October 11)</i>
10:32–45	<i>On the Road: Third Passion Prediction (October 18)</i>
10:46–52	<i>The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (October 25)</i>

Jesus in Jerusalem Mark 11:1–13:37

11:1–12:37	Entry into Jerusalem and Addressing Questions
12:38–44	<i>Religious Hypocrisy and the Poor Woman's Offering (November 8)</i>
13:1–8	<i>The Temple and the End-time (November 15)</i>
13:9–37	Foretelling Persecution and the Destruction of the Temple

The Passion of Jesus

Mark 14:1–15:47

The Resurrection

Mark 16:1–8

The Longer Ending of Mark Mark 16:9–20

Gospel of Mark