

High Hopes

Mark 7:24-37

Pastor Andy MacFarlane

Most of you know that Hope and I spent a couple of years as missionaries from 1997 to 1999 in Chile. One of the things we had to do was leave our hope and expectations for relationships in the U.S. culture here and learn a whole new way of relating to people in a different culture. For example, when a man greeted a woman or a woman greeted a woman, the culturally accepted greeting was to touch right cheeks and kiss the air and then touch left cheeks and kiss the air. To simply offer a hand shake for a greeting there would be considered “Muy Frio”—very cold. In the same way, if we were at a gathering of college students—maybe 20 or 25 at a social or a party—and I said, “Hey, got to go...see you guys” I would have just offended 20-25 people. You needed to tell each person good-bye individually in the same way you greeted them.

Perhaps most challenging for me was the indirectness of Latin culture. I often say, generally speaking, Latins go from Lincoln to Omaha *through* Kansas City—you go around and around and around and around. So we had to learn to be very cautious and careful in what we said and how we said it. I could go on with examples, but my point is that different cultures have different norms and expectations in relationships. The hopes and expectations for relationships in the United States are very different than those in Chile.

In a similar way, the hopes and expectations on a human level for relationships are very different from what God expects for us. Just as it was important for us to learn Chilean hopes and expectations, I think it’s also important for us as people who follow God to learn God’s hopes and expectations for relationships.

With that in mind, let’s look at Mark chapter 7, verses 24-37. As we look at this passage, we’re going to try and answer the question: What are God’s hopes and expectations for our relationship with Him?

Mark 7:24:

Jesus got up and went away from there to the region of Tyre. And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice.
(*NASB)

Jesus apparently just wants to get away for some R&R and not be bothered by people. But it’s not going to work out, because in verse 25 there is a person with a very legitimate need.

But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately came and fell at His feet.

This woman’s daughter is demon-possessed. And in verse 26 we find out an interesting fact and important detail about this woman.

Now the woman was a Gentile, of the Syrophenician race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Jesus responds in verse 27:

And He was saying to her, “Let the children be satisfied first [*it’s a reference to*

the Jews; the blessing, the favor of God is for the Jews], for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs [a reference to her being a Gentile].

Personally, this is one of the hardest verses in Scripture for me. Here comes a woman in desperate need; her daughter is demon-possessed. She throws herself at Jesus' feet, and Jesus references her as a dog. The Greek word is indicative of a household pet. This is not a mangy mutt that's walking the street. But friends, a dog is a dog! For those who have this idea that Jesus was always this affable fellow, verse 27 stands in contrast to that.

But she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs." And He [Jesus] said to her, "Because of this answer go; the demon has gone out of your daughter." (vs. 28-29)

Something about her response catches Jesus' attention and touches His heart. In a minute we will talk about what it was about her answer that moved Jesus so much. In verse 30 she takes Jesus at His word in faith:

And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having left.

This is the only healing at a distance that is recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Now, last night in the message I left out that detail: "recorded in the Gospel of Mark." And the Bible Police found me out and made me swear that I would mention that. So let me repeat: this is the only healing at a distance that is recorded in the Gospel of Mark.

This woman's answer really catches Jesus' attention. Why is that? I think it has to do with the fact that she gets called a dog and her attitude is, "Jesus, if you want to call me a dog, I am a dog." She's willing to accept His assessment of her.

I've got to ask: If you were in that position—you had thrown yourself at Jesus' feet and He referred to you as a dog—how would you respond? So many in our world would respond with indignation and anger, "How dare you!" and they would walk away.

What are God's hopes and expectations for our relationship with Him? God wants us to accept His assessment of us. **God wants us to accept His assessment of us.**

One of our dearest family members, a cousin and her husband, are committed followers of Christ. Years ago, when their oldest child was a baby, a friend of hers stopped by. This friend worked with young children, either as a nurse or therapist or something, and she noticed immediately that the baby was developmentally delayed. So she made an appointment to talk with my cousin. I don't remember if they talked by phone or in person, but she shared her observation about the baby with my cousin. As my cousin related the story to us, she said her first response was denial. She thought, *No way! No way is there something wrong with my baby!* It was denial followed by anger, *Who are you to tell me there's something wrong with my child? What makes you think you can say that?* But after a couple of days, she decided to have her child evaluated. The evaluation confirmed the friend's observation. The child was developmentally delayed, and intervention was started immediately.

Today that child is a senior in high school, and although she has some limitations, she's doing really well. She's very high functioning. My question is: Where would that senior in high school be today if her mother and father had continued in their denial and anger? What if 16

years ago my cousin had refused to deal with the reality that there was something wrong with her baby? I say she'd be a lot worse off than she is today.

I share this because God makes some hard assessments about you and about me. Do you know what He says? He says by nature, in our person, we are sinners. We have a broken relationship with our Creator, and there is no good work we can do to bridge that relationship—to reconcile it, to restore it. God says that our hearts—your heart and my heart—are desperately deceitful. Do you know how most people in our world respond to this message? The same way my cousin initially responded. They respond with denial, *No way am I a sinner by nature. No way am I like that!* And they respond with anger, *Who are you?* It's anger at the person, anger at the Word of God, and anger at God Himself for making that loving and correct assessment.

The tragedy is that many people continue in their denial and anger and refuse the real help, the real intervention, that God offers anybody who will surrender themselves to Him. You see, in the person of Jesus Christ, God offers a restored relationship. He offers a renewed person, a renewed heart. But if we are unwilling to accept His assessment of our lives, it's impossible for us to see the need for the help He offers. For our own good, God wants us to accept His assessment of us.

I want to push the application of this point a little bit. I think one of the ways God gives us His assessment is in His Word. He is speaking today to you and me, and He is giving His assessment of our lives. We need to be hearing from Him regularly. We need to be having a regular intake of God's Word.

I also believe God gives His assessment of us through other Christian brothers and sisters, which can be more specific and more focused. As a young adult, I was very melancholy, very controlled by my feelings and circumstances. I had just started my work with Campus Crusade and we had an end-of-the-year meeting to evaluate and plan for the next year. It was a day or two later when my director pulled me aside and said, "Do you know, Andy, that you absolutely controlled that meeting with your body language, your demeanor, your facial expressions?" In my heart I thought, *Come on. Maybe, but it wasn't that bad. Back off. I think you're overstating it.* Later, Crusade had moved me and I was at another campus, and in the next two or three years I would have many of those conversations with good friends. "Andy, did you know you did this and you got everybody's attention?" So I began to evaluate these conversations, and I determined that God was speaking to me. I realized, *I've got an issue here.*

What was confusing for me was that I could give you book, chapter and verse in the Bible on how God controls our circumstances and how He is sovereign over them. Apparently I had the knowledge, but I wasn't living it out. So I began a process of some conversations and some revealing of who I was with these close friends, which for me even involved some counseling. And I saw God grow me through that. I wonder where I would be today if I had rejected what my friends had to say to me.

You see, I think God is constantly assessing our lives so that we can take the next step in our faith. He can't dump the truck all at once; it would overwhelm us. So He gives us continual assessment so that we can take the next step, and the next step, and then the next step in our faith.

Are you hearing God's assessment? Are you accepting it? Are you getting into His Word regularly? Do you have authentic community? Do you have the relationships where people can speak truth into your life? Are you willing to hear that? You see, that is why as a church we are pushing LifeGroups. We think it is in these groups that we can develop authentic communities. In these groups we can develop safe relationships so that we can speak truth to one another. We believe God speaks through that, and these relationships are critical to our Christian growth. God wants us to accept His assessment of us.

There's a second supernatural working of Jesus, and we pick it up in verse 31:

Again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis. They brought to Him one who was deaf and spoke with difficulty, and they implored Him to lay His hand on him. Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, "Ephphatha!" that is, "Be opened!" And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly. And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it. They were utterly astonished, saying, "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." (vs. 31-37)

Mark has an interesting choice of words here. In chapter 7, verse 32, he uses a word to describe the speech problem that is found only in one other place in the whole Greek translation of the Bible. (The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Bible.) This word that we find in Mark 7:32 is found only in one other place—in Isaiah 35:6. In that passage the prophet Isaiah is talking about the coming Messiah. He says when that Messiah comes, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. There are just two places where that word shows up. You see, with his word choice, Mark is saying to his readers that this Jesus is the Messiah; He is the One of whom Isaiah spoke years ago.

But I don't think the original audience got that. In verse 37 we see they were overwhelmed; they were stunned, amazed, at what went on. I would say they were even sympathetic to Jesus. Look at how they describe His actions in verse 37: "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." They're sympathetic, but they won't follow. In verse 36 they defy Jesus' order not to tell anyone about the miracle. We could speculate from now until the cows come home about why He told them not to tell anyone. But Jesus had his own reasons. And the more Jesus ordered their silence, the more they continued to proclaim it. These folks were not submitting to Jesus.

Earlier in the song "You Are Holy" we sang these words with passion: "I will follow. I will listen. You're my Prince of Peace, and I will live my life for You." Are you committed to that? You see, these folks weren't. And they were no help in moving forth the kingdom of God. In fact, they were a hindrance.

What are God's hopes and expectations for a relationship with Him? God wants us to submit ourselves to His rule. **God wants us to submit ourselves to His rule.**

For the first three years as a student at Texas A&M, I lived right next to the dorm complex that housed the Corps of Cadets. So I passed by there every day for those three years. At A&M the Corps is run like West Point or Annapolis, in that the first year cadets are "challenged" to see if they have the character to be an officer in the armed forces. So every

day I would see these freshmen being put through these inane tests as I walked by. And I would think, *Now I understand why people make jokes about our university!* (Aggie jokes are big in the South). But it did arouse my curiosity.

So I would be in class with some of these freshmen cadets and I'd ask them about all these trials they endured. And boy, did I find out stuff. One of the things I found out is that it was not a fish (freshman were called "fish") privilege to think. So here's how it works. Upperclassmen would be rapidly firing these questions: "What about this? What about that? Got to recite this. Got to recite that. Who do you think is going to win the football game Saturday?" The freshman has to be sharp, because when you hear the word "think" you have to say, "Sir, it is not a fish privilege to think. Sir, a fish is the lowest form of human being and a fish cannot think. A fish can only 'cojotate' Sir." (Now *you* understand why people make jokes about Texas A&M!)

But as I got to know some upperclassmen, they explained that there was a real purpose for this first year—even the part about freshmen not being able to think. Every year scores of people graduate from A&M to go serve as officers in the Army, Navy, and Air Force. And in the military when you get an order, you don't think; you just follow the order. So that freshman year is intentional. It's designed to break the will of the cadet, so that when he gets an order down the road, he doesn't think about it, doesn't consider it, doesn't ponder it, but just does it. Lives are on the line and we need execution of the order now.

You know, we need to get to that point in our relationship with God. When we get a clear mandate in Scripture and we sense God's clear leading in our lives, we don't need to think about it. We don't need to consider it. We need to *do* it. Now, as Bryan pointed out last week, we need to be wise that we're discerning between the commands of God and the tradition of man. And I understand at times it's a process of trying to figure out, *Where is God leading? Where does He want me to go?* I understand that. But once we figure that out, we need to do it. And we're a bit like those freshmen cadets at A&M. We are in process. We're in the process of having our will broken. None of us are perfect in our obedience. None of us are perfect in our submission. But that is what God desires for us.

I think one of the ways we can grow in our submission to God is, as we grow in our relationship with Him, we come to a greater understanding of His goodness. And as we grow in our understanding of God's goodness, I believe it becomes easier to submit to His rule in our lives. If God is good, why would I not follow Him? Having said that, I've got to tell you, there will be times in our lives where in the moment we will not see God's goodness. But we are called to follow Him anyway. He is God. He outranks us. We need to submit.

Right before I got up to speak, we sang these words: "Today I choose to follow You. Today I give my 'Yes' to You." Is that the answer to your heart? Are there any areas in your life in which you know you are clearly in disobedience to God? If so, will you choose to follow Him? Today in those areas, as hard as it might be, will you give your "Yes" to God? God wants us to submit ourselves to His rule.

So, seeing that God wants us to accept His assessment and He wants us to submit ourselves to His rule, I think God wants us to take something else from our relationship with Him. It's interesting to me that Mark places this interaction with the Gentile woman and the ministry in Decapolis, a widely Gentile area, right after Jesus rejected the Pharisees' teaching on cleanliness. In Mark 7:1-23 Jesus said that cleanliness isn't a matter of how you wash your hands or what you eat. In fact, in verses 18 and 19, He said it's not what goes in that makes

you unclean; it's what comes out. This is a continuation of Jesus' rejection of the Pharisees' traditional teaching. Only this time He is rejecting their traditional teaching on codes of conduct—of how and with whom a Gentile interacts. In chapter 7:24-30 Jesus gives His blessing, His favor, to a Gentile woman; that's unheard of! Then He ministers in Decapolis, this widely Gentile area. Jesus is crossing social and cultural and religious lines for the sake of the message. And He wants us to follow His example—to cross all kinds of lines for the sake of the gospel.

What is this that motivates Jesus to cross these lines? I think it's a concern, a care, for people. Look at verse 33, where a deaf mute is brought to Jesus. Jesus has His program and places to go. But this guy isn't a project; he's not something to be done with. He's a person! In verse 33 Jesus takes him aside from the crowd and He's going to give him His full attention. In verse 34 it says He looked up to heaven with a deep sigh. What's that sigh about? I think that sigh is about the pain and the hurt of sin. Jesus knows this is not the way it's supposed to be and He has a desire to make it right. He cares about people.

We asked the question: What are God's hopes and expectations for our relationship with Him? I think He wants us to pick something up. He wants us to so care for people that we cross cultural and social and religious lines for the sake of the gospel. **He wants us to so care for people that we cross cultural, social and religious lines for the sake of the gospel.**

Friends, this is why we're planting a church in north Lincoln. For some, and even many, this town divides north and south at "O" Street. Some folks just aren't going to come to Highway 2 and 70th Street to go to church. Now, we have many folks from north Lincoln and areas around north Lincoln who come to church here. Our hope for the north church is that it will be much easier for them to say to their neighbor, "Hey, will you come to church with me?" It's pretty hard when you have to say, "You have to go all the way to Highway 2 and 70th." We think it will be a lot easier to say, "Come with me. I'm going right over to North Star High School." Our hope is that planting a church in north Lincoln will move the gospel forward to that end of town—to make it easier for those people who live up there to minister and share God's message.

This is the reason we do Missions Conference—why we put so many resources into missions and why we spent two weeks in November. Jesus is giving us a model. He crosses cultural lines to go to those who haven't heard. This has application for us corporately, but it also has application for us individually, because I think each one of us in our heart sets up lines. That person—maybe they're of a certain political persuasion. Or maybe they live a certain kind of lifestyle, so I just kind of cut them out of my life. They may be in my sphere of influence, but I tend to ignore them. Or maybe it's a person of a certain ethnic background or certain socio-economic class. I just make sure they never make it into my sphere of influence so I don't have to deal with them. Jesus is calling us with His example to examine our hearts. Are there people we will not pursue for the sake of the gospel for some reason? If so, we need to repent. We need to ask God to change our hearts.

Suze Orman is one of the most recognized financial gurus of our day. She has a weekly program on CNBC and she has published six straight best-selling financial self-help books. She tells the story of how, when she was 13 years old, her father's tiny food stand went up in flames and he barely escaped with his life. The family showed up and they were watching as the stand went up in flames. Suddenly her father realized that the metal cash box was still inside the food stand. So, much to everyone's disbelief, her father ran back into the inferno to get the cash box. However, the intense heat had sealed the drawer shut. So he picked up the

scalding box and carried it outside and threw it on the ground. In the process it took skin on his arms and his chest off.

In her book, *The 9 Steps to Financial Freedom*, Orman says this: “That was when I learned that money is more important than life itself. From that point on, earning money—lots of money—not only became what drove me professionally, but also my emotional priority.” You see, she was close to her father and she picked up the value of money, because it was what he risked his life for. It didn’t matter what he said; it was what he did. He gave his life for money.

In the same way, if we will draw near to Jesus, we will find out His value is people. He just didn’t risk His life; He *gave* His life for people. Why? Because people have value. If, like me, you know you need to grow and change in this area, do not beat yourself up. Do not start early on your New Year’s resolutions thinking, *I’m going to be a much nicer person from here on*. That isn’t going to get it done. What we need to do is draw near to Jesus—that we might pick up His values and His value for people.

Before agreeing to date me in the summer of 1993, my wife Hope told me she needed an explanation of what had happened two years earlier. In the summer of 1991 we had gone out for six straight weekends while we were together at the Institute of Biblical Studies, Campus Crusade’s Bible School in Ft. Collins, Colorado. Because I had failed to communicate my hopes and expectations for our relationship, she was disappointed at the end of the summer when I said, “You know, you’re a great friend and I’ll be praying for you” as she headed off to be a career missionary in Kazakstan. Because of the amount of time we had spent together, she thought there might be more to our relationship. Many of you are thinking, *Well, Andy, she’s got a point!* But because of my insecurities and the great distance there would be between us, I didn’t know how to pursue the relationship. So I said nothing. It was never my intention to mislead or hurt her. And obviously things worked out between us. But because of my failure to communicate my hopes and expectations, I caused confusion and hurt and mistrust. So I had to explain my actions to gain her trust as we started our dating relationship.

You know, God doesn’t want any of that in our relationship with Him. He is very upfront about His hopes and expectations for our sake. So one more time I’d like to ask and answer the question: What are God’s hopes and expectations for our relationship with Him? **God wants us to accept His assessment of us. God wants us to submit ourselves to His rule. And God wants us to so care for people that we cross social and cultural and religious barriers for the sake of the gospel.**

Our Father in heaven, we are again amazed at the example of Jesus Christ and His care for people. And Lord, most of us fall short. Would you change our value system? Would You fill us with Your values and change our heart—that we would move towards people for the sake of the gospel. Then, Father, I pray that we would be people that willingly submit to You, knowing that You’re good. Would you build that conviction in us? And then as You give us Your assessment, either through the Word or through other people, I pray we would humbly accept that—that we could take the next step in our faith. Lord, this is more than we can do in and of ourselves. We need Your Spirit to enable us to live this Christian life You have for us. So strengthen us to do what I pray. In Christ’s name, Amen.

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Study Questions
The Good News About Jesus According to Mark
High Hopes
Mark 7:24-37
Pastor Andy MacFarlane

Opening Discussion

1. Have you ever been hurt in a relationship because of unspoken expectations? What happened?

What difference would it have made if hopes and expectations had been clear?

2. What is it like to be in the presence of someone with whom you do not know how to respond appropriately?

Bible Study

1. In Mark 7:24-30, how do you think you would have responded if you had been the woman? Why?

Are you surprised that Jesus referred to this woman as a dog? Why or why not?

2. The Bible declares that by nature we are sinners (Romans 5:12-14) and that our hearts are deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9). Why is that such a hard assessment to hear?

How do you think most people would respond upon hearing that assessment?

Why is it critical that we accept God's assessment of our lives?

3. Do you believe God can reveal His assessment of your life through Christian brothers and sisters? Why or why not?

4. In Mark 7:36, why do you think the crowd so blatantly disobeyed Jesus?

Given their kind words about Jesus in verse 37, how would you assess the spiritual condition of the crowd?

Do you know people in your sphere of influence that would fit into the spiritual condition of the crowd? How do you relate to such people?

5. Why do you think Jesus broke Jewish customs by ministering among the Gentiles?

What types of people do we, the church, tend to ignore or exclude? Why?

How do you think we can go about changing these customs?

Application

1. Are you getting God's assessment of your life on a regular basis? Are you spending time in His Word on a regular basis? If not, what changes do you need to make to your schedule so that you can be in God's Word regularly?

Do you have friends that speak truth into your life? Do you give your friends freedom to say difficult things to you?

2. Are there any areas of your life that are not submitted to God? If so, what would it mean for you to submit those areas to Him?

Why do you find it difficult to submit in those areas?

What steps do you need to take in order to grow in your understanding of God's goodness?

3. Are there any types of people that you avoid or purposely shut out of your life?

What do you think it will take for you to follow Jesus' example by moving towards all types of people for the sake of the Gospel?