

Mark 1 v 35-45 - Littlebourne 18th April 2021

Do we sometimes love the gift more than the giver?

We're looking this afternoon at the next 10 verses in Mark's gospel, which will take us right up to the end of chapter 1. So let's get straight to it:

Jesus Praying

Verse 35

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

We heard last week about the whole of the day before this - a day where Jesus spoke in the synagogue, cast out an unclean spirit, healed Peter's mother in law, and then, verse 32

"That evening, at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons."

He had a very busy day, likely lasting late into the night. And after this late night, he gets up early - whilst it was still dark - and goes off on His own. He deliberately spends less time in bed to get up and pray. That should tell us something about what Jesus thought of prayer.

Two weeks ago, I was talking about Jesus' perfect humanity and life of obedience and righteousness when we looked at Jesus' baptism and temptation. So what we see Jesus doing, is not just some inter-trinity communication, though it is that. Jesus, in his humanity, is communicating with God, and that's important for us because it acts as our example - we too should be in communication with God. If Jesus needed His Father's help and guidance, how much more do we?

It shows that prayer is more than confession. There's a tendency in all of us to ignore God when things are going well. But when we feel guilty, we flee to God. The fact that Jesus, the sinless man, prayed, shows us that prayer should be more than seeking forgiveness, more than confession. Jesus had nothing to confess, no sin to repent of, but he still needed to talk to His Father.

Confession is important, but it's only an aspect of prayer. And we should seek God at all times, not just when we think we need Him, or when we want something.

Notice that Jesus goes off on his own. Not only does Jesus seek God as a priority, as the first things He does that day, but that He seeks God in solitude. His relationship with His Father is not just for the benefit of His disciples. He doesn't just pray at the prayer meeting or only on Sundays. He has a personal relationship and He maintains His relationship.

Maybe the fact that this recorded instance of prayer happened after a particularly busy day is indicative of the importance of prayer in Jesus' ministry, as a source of fuel for the work He was doing.

John Calvin said that "prayer is the chief exercise of faith". And like any exercise, it is improved by practice and persistence.

To pray is to be Christlike - let's take Him as our example.

Verse 36 - 37

And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you."

Jesus has been off on his own and the disciples are looking all over for Him. When they do find Him they offer a sort of rebuke "where have you been?". But aren't they really saying that they think they know better what Jesus should be doing than He does? "Everyone is looking for you" or rather, "you ought to be out there like you were yesterday."

We can be like that, putting our priorities before God's. The disciples want Jesus to do what they are interested in, what they can see in Jesus' public ministry - they don't understand the importance of what Jesus was doing in private. Jesus was doing essential activity, but because they couldn't see it, they didn't find it helpful. We too can be discouraged when we feel God is not doing a visible, public work, when He does so much that is unseen.

Verse 38 - 39

And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Jesus' response to His disciples is that he came to preach - and to preach not just in Capernaum, but all around. His disciples presumably wanted Him to keep on with the physical healing, seeing that He was having an impact.

I think it's fair to say that an important aspect of Jesus' work was to heal. But healing physically was not the main thing. Jesus, through preaching, through spreading the good news, healed more than physical ailments. Jesus is more a specialist in healing souls.

It's possible that the people in Capernaum were so caught up in the physical healing that they were no longer interested in the message that Jesus was bringing, so Jesus goes to other places in order to preach there instead. Let's not miss the point when we come to Jesus. We shouldn't seek just a quick fix from Jesus, something that satisfies only our immediate need.

The Leper's Cleansing

Verse 40

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean."

Before we look at the leper's coming to Jesus, it's worth us reminding ourselves what leprosy was and how it was treated in first century Israel.

Leviticus chapter 13 tells us how leprosy was diagnosed and treated under Mosaic law. The first 44 verses of that chapter give instructions on how a priest was to tell if a skin condition was the sort that would make someone unclean or not. The key distinction that is employed is whether the skin is rotting away, whether the disease is worsening. Those pronounced unclean by the priest because of leprous disease were steadily heading toward death. Only relatively recently has modern medicine been capable of stopping the spread of leprosy, but not regrowing the damage that's already been done.

If someone was deemed unclean in this way, the next 2 verses describe the treatment:

The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' 46 He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

This uncleanness isolated the leper outside the camp and the lepers torn clothes and loose hanging hair are the signs of a mourner, in this case mourning for himself. It's not just the potential infectiousness that keeps the leper outside the camp - other unclean things were also to be kept outside the camp. He was excluded from the camp, not just to protect the health of Israel, but because God was in the camp and uncleanness (death) had to be separated from the presence of God (life).

Hebrews 10 verse 1 tell us that:

...the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities...

The laws of Moses represent deeper truths. As we saw two weeks ago that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice, that the sacrifices in the law pointed to, so leprosy, uncleanness and the consequences of it are a picture of sin.

As leprosy starts small and spreads, so does sin.

As leprosy goes more than skin deep, so does sin. Leprosy affects internal organs as well as the skin, just like sin is really an inner matter of the heart, rather than of outer action.

As leprosy leads to a loss of sensitivity, so does sin. Leprosy attacks the nerves of a person, so they no longer feel pain - lepers grow used to their condition and harm themselves because they no longer feel pain that would prevent injury. So too, sin that once produced guilt, over time just makes us numb.

As leprosy defiles all it touches, so does sin. One act of sin was enough to cause a fallen world.

As leprosy isolates, so does sin. Sin not only separates us from each other, it far more importantly separates us from our holy God.

As leprosy destined to fire, so does sin. That which was unclean was burnt outside the camp.

All who came into contact with someone or something unclean, would become unclean themselves and would have to spend time away from society and perform ceremonial washing to make themselves clean again. Not only were lepers made to live outside town, everyone else would have steered well clear of them too.

Jesus is preaching in the towns of Galilee to crowds of people, but we don't know where exactly He encountered this leper. This leper might well have only been able to get within arms reach of Jesus because of his condition, which would have parted the crowds. Or it might have been out between towns that Jesus encountered him, and Jesus and his disciples would have been able to see him approaching and kept their distance. In any case, Jesus let's him approach and gets close to him.

When he gets to Jesus, he says 'If you will, you can make me clean.'

He doesn't just ask for the physical healing of his leprosy, but to be made clean, able to participate as part of God's people once again.

Verse 41-42

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

Jesus does the unthinkable. He reaches out and touches an unclean leper, likely in full sight of many people. By the law of Moses, this makes Jesus unclean.

As Jesus is, according to the law, made unclean, the leper is immediately healed, immediately made clean.

Is Jesus sinning when He touches the leper? No, obviously, but why not?

For us, the old testament laws can be split into categories. Many split the law into three categories - moral, judicial and ceremonial, but really what we want to know is what applies to us and what doesn't. What is really morality proper and what was law given to point us to greater truths, as we saw in Hebrews?

There are some aspects of the old testament law that might be hard to categorise, but I think it's reasonable to say that the law on leprosy is in the latter category - a law that is primarily ceremonial and used to point towards deeper truth, as we saw with the comparison of leprosy to sin.

So when Jesus breaks the ceremonial law, we're seeing a glimpse of the new covenant - that what makes us clean is not the observance of the law and offering sacrifices. The law condemns, but Jesus makes us clean.

Galatians 3 verse 13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us

In Jesus touching the leper, we see that He becomes unclean, takes the curse of the law from the leper, and in so doing the leper is cleansed. A small picture of redemption - of Jesus taking our sin from us in exchange for His righteousness.

Verse 43-44

And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them."

Jesus, who has just shown He is Lord over the ceremonial law, the fulfilment of the law, now seems to be concerned with the following of the ceremonial law. Why? To show the priest what has happened, to be a witness to the religious authorities.

Leviticus 14 tells us what was required of the leper and the priest to make the leper ceremonially clean again, after his disease had gone. First the leper was to go to the priest and the priest would then go outside the camp to examine the leper. If the leper was healed, the priest would offer sacrifices, still outside the camp, and ceremonially make the leper clean, so he could rejoin society.

The last example of leprosy being cleansed that they would have known of was from 2 Kings chapter 5, which makes clear that the healing of Naaman is a miraculous, supernatural occurrence. The king of Israel, to whom the king of Syria sent his general, Naaman, for healing, remarks in verse 7,

"Am I God, to kill and make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?"

The priests would have known that leprosy was something that required God's intervention - they would never themselves have used the laws of Leviticus 14 in cleansing a healed leper. So in asking the leper to go to the priests, as a witness to them, Jesus is not just saying 'tell them a healer is around'. No, He's showing them that He is from God, acting in God's power.

Jesus' direction is to go directly to the priest, to follow the law and be cleansed properly as a witness to the priests. I don't think Jesus was concerned necessarily about the leper spreading the news - there was plenty of news of that sort going round already, how else did the leper know to go to Jesus - rather, Jesus is saying go straight to the priests and don't delay.

But the leper has other ideas.

Verse 45

But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

Maybe the (now former) leper was more interested in his physical healing than in the ceremonial cleanness that would come from the priest. Maybe he was just overjoyed and couldn't help but tell people what had happened.

In failing to witness to the priests and instead spreading the news, Jesus could no longer come to town. Were people aware that not only was there miraculous healing, but that Jesus had actually touched a leper and that's why Jesus couldn't enter town? Or was Jesus just mobbed with people?

In any case, Jesus must operate outside town for a bit - he has become the outcast, having touched the outcast and taken his uncleanness from him.

Conclusion

Often, we can get so caught up in whatever is in front of us, whatever bothers us today, be it physical ailment or something else, that we forget that Jesus has done something so much more glorious than taking care of today's problem. Jesus takes our sin from us and gives us new life.

We can be like those who came to Jesus for physical healing, but weren't interested in anything more from Jesus.

We can be like the disciples, who wanted Jesus to keep doing what He was doing the night before rather than let Him do what He thinks is best.

We can be like the leper, who got what he wanted and then didn't obey Jesus afterwards.

Do we love the gift more than the giver? Do we want Jesus to take care of a particular problem we have and then leave us alone? Are we taking advantage of Jesus to suit our own ends or are we really treating Him as our King? Is our prayer life one of real relationship or one of occasional neediness? Jesus didn't come primarily to give us physical healing, as good as that is - and we of course look forward to something better than any physical healing we can get today, in the hope of the resurrection - but he came to give new life in Him, union with Him.

What the leper needed more than healing of his leprosy was healing of his metaphorical leprosy, his sin, without which his life as an outcast would be eternal rather than temporal. But what the leper did at first is what we must do - come to Jesus with humility and knowledge of our own unworthiness and ask Him with faith, "If You will, You can make me clean".

And approach with expectation - Jesus, who left heaven and came to sinful earth in much the same way as the priest would leave the camp to make sacrifices to cleanse a leper, also takes on uncleanness to be that very sacrifice for sin.

He will not turn you away, He will turn you around.

(See Hebrews 13:11-12 - Jesus suffered outside the camp, like a sin offering was burned outside the camp.)

A note on the different versions of verse 41a

Most translations render verse 41a as 'He had compassion' or 'Moved with pity', or similar. The latest editions of the NIV, and a few other translations, render it as 'Jesus was indignant'.

One 5th century greek manuscript and a few Latin manuscripts give the 'indignant' (ὀργισθείς) word, whereas the rest give the 'compassion' (σπλαγχνισθείς) word. Thus, the external evidence supports reading of compassion/pity.

The new NIV likely uses 'internal' evidence, which suggests that it is more likely for a scribe to change to 'compassion' from 'angry' than the other way round. However, in later passages in Mark, Jesus is indignant, which suggests it might not just have been scribes toning down Jesus. Maybe scribes toned Jesus the other way in light of v43, as Jesus is stern with the leper?

Thankfully, the NIVs in the chapel are an old enough edition to be in line with the bulk of translations, so it didn't need to be raised in the sermon.
