

# Prayer and Healing

Mark 1:35-45

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Entertainment is a big part of modern life in America. We are big on TV shows and movies; we share videos from YouTube or other places online that we think are funny, or otherwise entertaining; and we watch sporting events for entertainment. A significant portion of our time and energy is dedicated to entertainment in some form.

As such, when we come across something we find particularly noteworthy, we tend to talk to other people about it. We have all told someone about a show or movie we've seen and recommended that they go see it for themselves. If you saw an amazing play in a game the night before, you tell people to go look up the highlights, because it's worth your time. When we find something particularly noteworthy or entertaining, we want to share it with others so they can have a similar experience.

This is what was happening in Jesus' ministry at this point. Word had begun to spread that Jesus was doing amazing miracles, and people didn't want to miss out. As you can imagine, people who had seen Jesus heal others told their friends about it, because they didn't want them to miss out on the action. Those who wanted healing made their way to Jesus, and so did those who were interested in seeing the miraculous. Jesus had become a spectacle that everyone needed to witness with their own eyes.

This morning, we're going to look at how Jesus handled this popularity. We'll see what He valued most, and we'll take a look at our own motives to see why we are interested in Jesus—whether we're simply interested in the spectacle, or something more.

## Jesus' Priority

Our passage this morning picks up immediately after our passage last week, where Jesus cast an evil spirit out of a demon-possessed man in the synagogue. Later that same day, Jesus came to Peter's house and healed his mother-in-law. As word began to spread through the town, people made plans to come to Jesus. And after sunset on the Sabbath (which meant the Sabbath was over, and people could do such things), they came to where Jesus was. He spent the evening healing people and casting out demons. Mark says the whole town came out to watch. It is after that night that our story picks up.

<sup>35</sup> Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray. <sup>36</sup> Later Simon and the others went out to find him. <sup>37</sup> When they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you." <sup>38</sup> But Jesus replied, "We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. That is why I came." <sup>39</sup> So he traveled throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons. (Mark 1:35-38, NLT)

After a long night of healing people, Jesus was surely exhausted. Nonetheless, He got up before daybreak so He could find an isolated place to pray. We see this pattern often

in the life of Jesus. He would often carve out some time He could spend in prayer, hopefully uninterrupted by others. Most of us would do the opposite; when we'd had a long night, we'd forgo our prayer time so we could sleep in!

But why did Jesus feel these times of prayer were so important? Wasn't Jesus God? Why was it necessary for Him to pray at all?

Jesus was in very nature God. At no point during Jesus' time on earth did He cease to be God. Yet, Jesus also chose to place limits on himself—choosing to live only as a man. Jesus still possessed His powers as God, but chose not to exercise them. Instead, He lived in the same power you and I have. This means that Jesus did not possess universal knowledge as God, but only His human knowledge and what God revealed to Him. He was not able to heal people in His own power, but only by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Him. Jesus faced the same struggles and temptations as you and me—He got tired, He got hungry, and at times He surely must have been tempted to turn from the task before Him. But He persisted. One of the ways He was able to do so was because He spent much time in prayer. He understood the importance of spending time with His Heavenly Father, because that was His source of strength and where His anchor was found.

If it was so important for Jesus to spend time with the Lord that He carved out time to do so regularly, how much more important is it for you and me to do so! Jesus found strength and direction from the time He spent with the Father, and we can too.

Prayer is something many people struggle with. I suspect there are many reasons for this, but one of the big ones is that we cannot see God. And rarely (if ever) do we hear God speak to us with an audible voice. As such, it is easy for us to get sidetracked, or to imagine that what we are doing isn't accomplishing anything. Sometimes we act like prayer is only about coming to God with our list of requests and then moving on. But I believe the kind of prayer we should be seeking is much deeper. It is a time of reflecting on God's character, of reminding ourselves of who He is and what He has done for us. It is a time of pouring out our hearts before Him and asking for His help, and at times, His forgiveness. And indeed, we will often come to Him with the concerns that weigh upon our hearts as well.

Someone has used the analogy that we are like film in a camera in that whatever we gain exposure to is what image we will ultimately reflect. As we expose ourselves more to the character of God, we will reflect His character to a greater and greater degree. So how do we go about making prayer a more consistent and essential part of our lives? I've got some suggestions.

- Carve out time. Jesus got up early to pray, you may need to do the same, or maybe you can stay up late, or find another time. If you spend a lot of time alone in the car, choose to turn off the radio and talk to God (but leave your eyes open!) Find what works for you and carve out some time where you can be alone with God. We must be intentional about this, or it simply won't happen.

- Pray with a pencil and paper nearby. If you struggle with distractions when praying, use the pencil and paper to deal with the distractions. When something distracts you, write it down, so you can remember to come back to it later, and then you are free to return to your time with God.
- Keep a list of things you want to talk to God about. Not just a list of things you want God to do, but reminders of God’s character, verses you’ve found helpful, struggles you need to confess, etc. These things will help you make prayer a priority and direct your praying.
- Keep a list of the ways you have seen God work through your prayers. As you see changes in yourself, in others, in situations, etc., keep track of them. Write them down to remind you how prayer truly makes a difference.
- Learn how to listen. You may never hear God speak back to you audibly, but over time, you’ll come to recognize God speaking to you in other ways as you pray. Sometimes it will be a verse that comes to mind as you pray about something, other times it will be a simple thought or direction that you will find helpful. Pray expecting God to speak to you—and be prepared to hear from Him.

Jesus saw prayer as a vital part of not only His ministry, but of His life. Jesus developed an intimacy with the Lord that was a result of His exposure to Him. We should learn from His example.

Jesus left before the sun came up, and likely before anyone else had awoken. When the others did get up, they realized Jesus was gone. Unsurprisingly, the next day people started talking about Jesus again, and many were looking for Him. So the disciples set out to find Him.

You can imagine how they must have felt. They were surely also tired from the events of the previous night, but also energized by the crowds coming to see Jesus. I suspect the disciples felt like it was good that people were finally coming to understand how great Jesus was, and they wanted to capitalize on His popularity to gain an even greater following. Many of us would think the same way. So, when they found Jesus, they told Him everyone was looking for Him, seemingly telling Him that He should return to town so He could “strike while the iron was hot” and continue to build on his newfound popularity. But Jesus didn’t share their enthusiasm for the crowd (don’t you wonder if this was something He had prayed about?) Instead, He told them they were going to move on, and go to other towns to preach instead, as that was why He came—to preach and point people to their need for a Savior.

Why does Jesus do this? I think Jesus understood that many people were simply coming to see Him for entertainment. Many who were there did not come to worship Him or to learn from Him, but rather to see the spectacle. Others were hoping they could benefit from the miracle-worker. The crowd would be less concerned with learning from Jesus and more concerned with getting Him to perform His next miracle. Jesus did not come primarily to perform miracles—but to teach and to lead us to Himself. Jesus helped the disciples see that He had different priorities. So they left town to go preach in other places in Galilee.

## The Leper

Mark tells us that Jesus and the disciples traveled around Galilee and preached in the synagogues, while also driving out demons and healing people. Jesus' primary purpose was not to perform miracles, but He did so as a way of showing that God's power was upon Him. It was a way of validating His ministry and teaching. As Mark continues, we also see how much Jesus cared for people, being moved with compassion when He saw people hurting.

<sup>40</sup> A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean," he said. <sup>41</sup> Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" <sup>42</sup> Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed. <sup>43</sup> Then Jesus sent him on his way with a stern warning: <sup>44</sup> "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."

<sup>45</sup> But the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened. As a result, large crowds soon surrounded Jesus, and he couldn't publicly enter a town anywhere. He had to stay out in the secluded places, but people from everywhere kept coming to him. (Mark 1:40-45, NLT)

Mark doesn't tell us exactly where this encounter took place, but he does tell us that a man with leprosy came to Jesus for healing. Leprosy in Jesus' day (and before) was a serious issue. In the book of Leviticus, there is a list of rules for how to deal with serious skin diseases. The basic idea is that if a person had a chronic, infectious skin disease, they were to remain separated from the rest of the community. This was a protection for the rest of the community, but it was also a picture of the fact that in order to be in the presence of God, we must be clean. Lepers were declared to be permanently unclean. Listen to the instructions given for those found to have leprosy,

<sup>45</sup> "Those who suffer from a serious skin disease must tear their clothing and leave their hair uncombed. They must cover their mouth and call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' <sup>46</sup> As long as the serious disease lasts, they will be ceremonially unclean. They must live in isolation in their place outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45-46, NLT)

Leprosy was a blanket term for all such diseases. It did not necessarily refer only to the disease we call leprosy (or Hansen's disease) today, but it certainly would have included that. Hansen's disease is a progressive disease that causes nerve endings to die away. Over time, a person ends up with injuries, ulcers, and infections in their extremities, and they ultimately lose them. People with leprosy often end up horribly disfigured. In addition, leprosy is contagious—and there was no treatment for it at this time, so people greatly feared those afflicted with the disease.

People with leprosy lived an isolated life. No one would touch them, and no one would even come near them. Their appearance made it clear from some distance that they were leprous and if their appearance didn't convince people to stay away, they were

required to announce to anyone passing by that they were unclean. Whether this man had Hansen's disease or some other incurable skin affliction, the effect was the same—he had been banished from his people and was treated as an outcast.

It is no surprise that this man would have desired healing from such an affliction. But he faced a dilemma—how could he get Jesus to heal him when he wasn't allowed near people? Apparently, he decided that his opportunity for healing permitted exceptional measures, so he came and knelt in front of Jesus. In faith, he said to Jesus, "If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean." Jesus did not recoil from the man (though I imagine the disciples might have) and He did not rebuke him. Instead, He touched him. It's possible this man had not known human touch since his diagnosis. We are told Jesus was filled with compassion for the man and said, "I am willing. Be healed!" The man was immediately cleansed. I imagine his transformation was jaw-dropping. His skin was cleared, he may have had limbs restored, and he would have felt alive again!

Jesus told the man that he should go and follow the instructions in Leviticus for being declared clean once more. He also told him not to tell anyone. We don't know if the man went and gave the offerings Jesus commanded, but we do know that he ignored Jesus' instructions not to tell anyone (which we kind of understand!) Unfortunately, this resulted in Jesus being mobbed whenever He went into a town, so His ministry had to remain out far from the cities, so only those who were willing to make the trek could come to see Him.

This account raises a couple of issues. **First, some say that this verse teaches that the Lord is always willing to heal us of physical maladies, we just have to have enough faith.** That is not what this passage is teaching, and I don't believe it's a valid application of it either. The text says Jesus was willing to heal *this man*. We are not told that Jesus is willing to heal everyone (though we are told several times in His ministry that He healed everyone who came to Him). But in other places in scripture, we see faithful believers who are sick and not healed. Paul is the quintessential example with his "thorn in the flesh". Paul asked God to heal him, but God refused, telling Paul that He had a purpose for his affliction. God is less concerned with our physical comfort than He is with our spiritual health. Sometimes God has a greater purpose for us that can only be fulfilled through our persisting in faith through a physical malady. We should take a position of humility, asking for God's healing, but remembering that if He doesn't heal us, it's because He has a greater purpose in mind.

**Secondly, does God still heal people like this today?** Some say that such miracles ceased after the Church was established. I will never say that God *cannot* heal people in miraculous ways today. He's God; of course He can heal people today! But does He? It's certainly a less frequent occurrence today than what we see during Jesus' ministry. Jesus healed as a way of establishing and validating His ministry. The Bible often calls these miracles signs—they pointed to Jesus' authority. The ultimate sign, of course, was the empty tomb. The establishment of the Church was a special time with a specific purpose. Such miraculous healings are not as necessary today in America as they were during Jesus' ministry, because the Church has now been established. I believe God

does still heal people miraculously today, it's just not as common, because it's not as necessary.

What we must also see in this passage is God's love and compassion for His people. Jesus felt compassion for this man and His malady. God sees you and me, and He cares. You are never alone. The Lord may not fix every issue you face when you want it to be fixed, but He does continue to care for you—and He has a plan to bring good out of everything you face. We just have to hold on to see what He does.

## Conclusion

For such a simple passage, there is a great deal for us to learn. So let's draw a couple of concluding applications.

**First, prayer is an essential part of the life of a believer.** Jesus' example makes this clear. If Jesus needed to spend time with the Lord in prayer, so do we. So we need to do the hard work of establishing prayer as a regular practice in our lives. Without it, we will never experience the fullness of God's strength, power, and guidance that is available to us and we will be driven by the world's agenda rather than the Lord's.

**Second, we must seek the Lord, not just what He can give us.** Many of those who were coming to Jesus were simply seeking to see the spectacle or see what they could get from Him. Jesus is not a magic genie granting people wishes. Unfortunately, many people today treat Jesus that way. We've all heard people say things like, "I tried religion and it didn't work." That statement is a clear sign of trying to use God rather than follow Him. If we are only willing to follow if God gives us what we want, then we aren't really following at all—we're trying to lead. We must take a position of humility before the Lord, recognizing that He knows best and seeking His guidance, even when it is hard. Following the Lord does not guarantee we will get everything we want. But when we rightfully recognize the Lord's authority, we will find His way is best.

**Third, Jesus is for everyone.** Jesus came to meet our deepest need—spiritual healing from sin. And He didn't come only to the popular, the acceptable, or those society deemed as being worth it. He came for everyone. No matter how stained your past is or how much of a mess your life is, Jesus invites you to come and find the true healing that He alone can provide.

Sometimes Christians act like certain people aren't worthy of the gospel—but none of us are! Sometimes we act like certain people aren't welcome to come into our churches and seek the Lord. We, as His followers must never turn our backs on those who genuinely seek to come to Him, but must welcome them with open arms, recognizing that God can bring genuine healing and restoration to anyone who will come. If we've experienced that healing, we should know it's open to everyone else as well. And the more time we spend with Jesus, the more we'll reflect His image and example.

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