

The Priority of Jesus (Part 1)

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 1:29-45

Introduction:

If I were to ask you to tell me about your greatest need in life, how would you respond? Many of us might answer that question in different ways. For some children and students, it might be to make good friends. For those close to graduation, it might be choosing your major in college. Maybe for some it would be to establish or advance in our career. Perhaps you would say your biggest need is to find a loving spouse, manage your finances, or learn how to parent better. There are many things we may find ourselves needing throughout life, but do we truly understand and recognize our greatest need? The next set of stories in Mark's gospel reveal to us how Jesus compassionately provides for the needs of people while prioritizing their greatest need. Today, we will focus in on the way Mark moves through a series of stories to announce and illustrate the priority of Jesus, and next week we will see this priority confirmed through the teaching of Jesus. I like to think of these verses as though we are watching a movie where one scene fades to black and the next fades in. Each scene shows something different but are moving a particular plot line along. Consider the first scene Mark relays, revealing,

JESUS' CARE FOR OUR AFFLICTIONS

Look at the way Mark begins in verses 29-31, "And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John." Following the teaching of Jesus and expulsion of the demon in the synagogue, Mark thrusts us into a more personal scene at the house of Simon and Andrew, one of the sets of brothers who follow Him. Note what happens in verse 31, "Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her." Look at how the focus is not on the illness of Simon's mother-in-law but what immediately happens. All we are told is she had a fever. Jesus hears about her fever, goes to her, takes her by the hand, lifting her up, and the fever is gone. No balm or medicine is needed, only the touch of Jesus. Then Mark records, "and she began to serve them." Now, some have tried to lay out a full teaching here in support of women's domestication but that is not what is happening, and we should be careful about when we make narrative prescriptive. What we are seeing from Mark is an immediate, full healing, and a gracious response by Simon's mother-in-law. There was no recovery time, no grogginess or stammering up to her feet. The fever was completely gone and her strength to serve them is proof of the healing. See both the care and power of Jesus over her affliction. She was ill. Jesus Christ saw her, cared for her, and restored her strength. Now, consider how this care of Jesus becomes magnified in verses 32-34, "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." Jesus' power to heal and cast out demons has spread. The number of those desiring the same kinds of miracles has exponentially grown, so much so that the whole city was bringing all who were sick or oppressed by demons to Jesus. What will Jesus do? Verse 34, "And he healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons." Jesus' care for the affliction of people goes on full display. When Mark records that he healed many, and cast out many demons, it doesn't mean there were only a select number who were healed and those who weren't. It is way of emphasizing the sheer amount of people healed and delivered by Jesus. This movement through the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, and the healing and deliverance of the whole city helps us see a couple of this. It first highlights how Jesus meets people in their needs in this life and provides perfectly for them in His grace and mercy. Church, do you believe that? It also begins to reveal how the kingdom of God is breaking in through Christ, the King. Do you remember the first proclamation Jesus made in Mark 1:15? He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

As Jesus cares for the afflictions of people, we see the kingdom of God breaking in through His power over sickness and the spiritual realm of darkness. The scene fades to black, and a new scene opens in verses 35-39, showing us,

THE KINGDOM PRIORITY ANNOUNCED

Notice the details Mark gives in verses 35-37, “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. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, ‘Everyone is looking for you.’” Following the night of healings, Jesus withdraws for prayer, before it even becomes light outside. It is worth noting that Mark only records Jesus withdrawing to pray 3 times in his gospel. The first is here after healing the whole city. The second is after he feeds the five thousand in the middle of the gospel. And the third is in Gethsemane when he asked God to “take this cup away.” Each time can be connected to a need to continue on the road to Calvary for which he came. Jesus knows the weakness of the human nature He took on. His withdrawal to pray should encourage us to sense and recognize our own need to do the same. What place does prayer hold in your life? Then, we see Simon and the disciples search for Jesus and when they find him, “Everyone is looking for you.” There is a tinge of reproach in this statement. As though to say, “Jesus, why aren’t you waiting at the house to perform more miracles. Everyone is coming to see you.” We can understand the temptation of the disciples, can’t we? When we experience a moment where God is so palpably moving, we just want to stay in that moment. We want him to work more miracles, we want to experience more of His power. The beautiful reality is God graciously meets us with the joy of His presence time and time again in these ways. Yet, these moments ultimately call us to move forward in spreading the good news of the kingdom, rather than a desire to just remain where we are and soak in as much as we can. Notice how the response of Jesus teaches us this. Look at verses 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.’” The response of Jesus shows there is a greater priority than remaining in Capernaum and continuing to perform miracles. Jesus says essentially, “No let’s move on.” Why? Because He came to preach. This is the same Greek Word used in verses 14, translated “proclaiming” there. The priority for Jesus is preaching, or proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, calling all who hear to repent and believe in the gospel. The healings and deliverance he provided was a sign of His care for all people, but there was something more important that He came for. This is because there is a greater need that we have than physical healing and earthy deliverance. The need of all of humanity isn’t solely the afflictions we face externally, but the captivity we are under internally. Note how this scene closes in verse 39, “And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.” After saying, let’s move on, Mark reveals how Jesus moved throughout Galilee executing His priority as He cares also for our afflictions. I picture this like a series of snap shots that appear at the close of a movie. Jesus in a synagogue preaching and casting out demons. Jesus in another synagogue preaching and casting out demons. Another snapshot, another snapshot. Each in rapid succession one after another, drawing to the consistency of preaching as the priority and care along the way. Then, it fades to black, but another scene begins showing us.

THE KINGDOM PRIORITY ILLUSTRATED

Pay attention to how Mark connects this story with the previous ones, through the way he begins verse 40, “And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, ‘If you will, you can make me clean.’” Each time I read this gospel; I am surprised by Mark’s decision to include this story at this point. Think about it with me. Wouldn’t you move directly to the preaching of Jesus? If that was His priority, wouldn’t you choose the next story to focus on the content of that preaching? Yet, what Mark focuses on is a particular healing that appears to happen while Jesus is fulfilling verse 39. As I have thought over the placement of this story, I believe there is a connection Mark has in mind, see if you agree. It’s found in the detail he repeats.

Read verses 40-42 carefully with me, “And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, ‘If you will, you can make me clean.’ “Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.” Notice the phrasing of the leper’s request, “if you will, you can make me clean.” Mark, then, never uses the word healing, but repeats the idea of being made clean 2 more times in these 3 verses, highlighting the importance of this concept. To understand this fully, let’s think about the significance of leprosy during this time. Leprosy was a seriously disease with detailed prescriptions in Leviticus 13-14 for handling it. Listen to one of the final commands in Leviticus 13:45-46 for this, “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.’ 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.” Those with leprosy were cast out of society because they were unclean. Because of the nature of leprosy, and the way the law addresses it, the disease was often seen as divine punishment for sin, and the cure only able to come from God. Warren Wiersbe captures a helpful summation of the connection to sin within instructions for leprosy noting, “When you read the ‘tests’ for leprosy in Leviticus 13, you can see how the disease is a picture of sin. Like sin, leprosy is deeper than the skin (v. 3); it spreads (vv. 5–8); it defiles and isolates (vv. 44–46); and it renders things fit only for the fire (vv. 47–59).” (Daniel L. Akin, Exalting Jesus in Mark, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), Mk 1:40–45.) I believe we are meant to see that commonly held connection to sin within this scene, so we can feel the significance of how Jesus responds. Look at verses 41-42, “Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.” Some older manuscripts say Jesus was moved in anger, and it has been said that later scribes massaged the language a little. If this is what it originally said, it wouldn’t be anger at the leper because Jesus was willing to cleanse him but would have signified his anger towards the effects of sin on humanity. Regardless of whether it is anger or pity, the point remains the same, Jesus moves towards the leper, touches him, tells him to be clean and immediately the leper is cleansed. He is willing to cleanse the leper. He doesn’t complain or revolt at the lepers approach of Him, and he isn’t made unclean by touching the leper. Again, we see how He cares for people in their affliction. But consider with me what Jesus does after this healing, starting in verse 43, “And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 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.’” The wording in Greek is strong language. Jesus firmly sends him away and gives him a very specific task. He commands the leper to perform the law’s requirements to be declared clean by the priests laid out in Leviticus 14. This would include going to the priests to be inspected, ensuring there was no leprosy, along with making guilt and sin offerings. Note two things in this. Once again, Jesus commands silence. He is not interested in His fame spreading from this incident. Secondly, Jesus encourages the man to fulfill the requirements of the law which included offerings for guilt and sin that point again to the focus on cleansing throughout this story. This is why I believe this cleansing illustrates the forgiveness and cleansing of sin connected to the preaching of Jesus. Next week, we will see Mark focus on another healing story that declares this with certainty. I believe Mark’s design in placing this here, is to help us to see that very cleansing as our greatest need and the reason that the kingdom priority is proclaiming the gospel, calling people to repent and believe. Our sin runs deeper than any case of leprosy could ever run. It affects the very core of who we are as people. And without Christ we are hopeless to do anything about it. We need His willing and gracious touch to cleanse us from within. The gospel tells us He purchased that cleansing through the shedding of His blood on the cross. And that all who call on Him in faith receive His gracious touch. Let’s look at the final verse together before bringing this to a close. 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.” Sadly, this man didn’t obey Jesus.

We don't know if he ever presented himself to the priest, but we do know he didn't remain silent. And, as the news spread, Jesus was relegated to desolate places. See a hint of our redemption in this. As James Edwards comments, "Jesus and the leper have traded places. Early in his ministry Jesus is already an outsider in human society. Mark casts him in the role of the Servant of the Lord who bears the iniquities of others (Isa 53:11) and whose bearing of them causes him to be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isa 53:12)." (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 72.)

Conclusion:

Oh church, there are many things we could take away from this passage. One could be a need to remind ourselves that Jesus does care for our afflictions and still heals today. He may not heal everyone we ask for on this side of eternity, but He will heal all of our sickness and disease one day. Do you go to him in your afflictions with the same kind of fervency we have seen people have in this passage? This may be part of the call for you today, to run to Him for that grace. Yet, as we consider these stories, I see 2 primary questions to ask in response.

1) HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED THE KINGDOM PRIORITY?

I pray you have seen how this passage reveals your greatest need to be the forgiveness of sin and cleansing from it that Jesus provides. Yet, we are called to not only see that truth, but respond to it. That way you are called to respond is by confessing your sin to Jesus and seeking His forgiveness. It is seeing His death on the cross as being for you, standing in your place. And it means placing your trust solely in Him for salvation. All you need sincere confession of sin and trust. All you must do is cry out to God like the leper, with an understanding of the gospel, and He will cleanse you. If you have not experienced that kingdom priority, take that step of faith today. The second question to ask is for all who have received the forgiveness and cleansing Jesus brings,

2) ARE YOU ENGAGED IN THE KINGDOM PRIORITY?

Is your greatest concern the need for people to hear and respond to the gospel? Do you want them to find forgiveness, cleansing and everlasting joy in Christ? Or do you just see situations around you to change? When you see the brokenness of our world, do you offer advice and quick fixes? Or do you speak of the one true hope in the gospel? Church, healing is great, provision is helpful in this life, joy, peace, comfort here and now are blessings, but no need compares to the greatest need everyone has to be forgiven, cleansed, and reconciled to God. Let's make this kingdom priority our priority and spread the gospel to this city, and the ends of the earth. As the worship team is coming back up to lead us in responding to this passage, we have a unique way to respond, as we will be baptizing some kids who have placed their trust in Jesus during our time of response. Their baptisms are publicly declaring they have experienced the kingdom priority. They have heard the gospel, repented, believed, and received Christ's cleansing of their sin. Biblically, baptism is one of the first acts of obedience in following Jesus. Baptism doesn't save anyone; it is a physical picture of the inward reality that has taken place. It is a picture of two beautiful realities. When we see people go under the water, that act symbolizes the washing and cleansing they have experienced when they trusted in Jesus. It is also a picture of how each person has died to their old way of living and raised to new life with Christ. This is why you will hear me say "buried with Christ in His death and raised to walk in the newness of life." Baptism is also a way of engaging in the kingdom priority, because, as they are baptized, they are publicly declaring to you the necessity of salvation and the cleansing work only Jesus provides.

Here at GracePoint, we also have a tradition where we light candles as each person is baptized. This provides another picture for us to think on. The first red candle represents Jesus, as the light of true life. Each candle lit after represents that light of true life being given to each person proclaiming they are following Him today. A light that is intended to shine before others as a living testimony of the kingdom priority. When you observe these things today, I encourage you to think on what they are representing.

As always, the call is for each of us to reflect on our own response to what we have seen in God's word today. At any point, you are invited to come and kneel in prayer if that is how the Lord leads. And we encourage you to sing for your heart and others around you. You can also come receive prayer from our team of people ready to pray for you and with you. They will be standing down at the front corners and bottom of the stairs in the back with lanyards on for you to identify them. Church, let's press in and receive God's grace as we respond. Would you pray together with me?