

“THE GREAT HEALER”

As we read about the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, we get a good sense of how he burst onto the scene in first century Israel. His authoritative preaching and exorcism of a demon-possessed man in the Capernaum synagogue caused his fame to spread all throughout the region of Galilee. And the healings that he performed in the text we have just read only added to his fame. News was spreading fast. And herein lies a fundamental difference between the healings that Jesus did and the purported healings of contemporary faith-healers. If these modern day figures really have the ability to cure sickness and disease, why isn’t The New York Times reporting this as front page news? Why isn’t CNN making it a breaking news story? Why isn’t everyone canceling their doctor appointments and throwing away their medications and going to see these people who have the ability to make them well? Those things are not happening because the works that these contemporary healers claim to be able to do are nothing like the works that Jesus Christ actually did. To suggest that they are is to greatly cheapen the healings done by Christ. His healings were done in public. They were immediate. They were unmistakable. As a result, the news about his healing power spread like wildfire, and this in a day long before the advent of mass media. The sick people who heard about him dropped everything and came to him, looking to be healed. And all of this took place in spite of the fact that Jesus did not call attention to his healing works. On the contrary, he

usually told people to keep quiet about what he had done for them, as he does with the leper in this passage.

The first of the healings recorded by Mark is that of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, whom Jesus healed of a fever upon arriving at her home. It is very likely, by the way, that this was the house that served as Jesus' own home during the years of his public ministry. Modern archaeologists have identified with near certainty the remains of this structure, which is located very close to the site of the Capernaum synagogue. Mark does not tell us the seriousness of the fever that was afflicting this woman, but it was bad enough to keep her off of her feet. And Jesus' healing was so immediate and so complete that she was able to get up right away and begin serving the special guest who had entered her home. We do not know anything else about this woman, but what an example she provides for every Christian. She responded to Christ's gracious work in her life by immediately serving him. We should do the same. In fact, our entire lives are to be lived in the service of Christ. For he has done far more than merely heal us of a fever. He has redeemed our life from the pit, and crowned us with steadfast love and mercy.

Later that evening, after the sun went down, people converged upon Peter's home, clamoring to see this man who had the power to make sick people well. They waited until evening because the rabbis forbade healing on the Sabbath, and a day was considered to be over as soon as the sun went down. It is clear that these people were

interested in Jesus because of his ability to heal and cast out demons. There is no indication that they were interested in his preaching. Nevertheless, Jesus healed many of them and cast out many demons that evening. Interestingly, Mark tells us that Jesus would not let the demons speak, because they knew who he was. Jesus silenced those demons because the time had not yet come for his identity as Messiah to be publicly revealed, especially not by witnesses such as these. Jesus knew that he had to avoid the kind of popularity that the people would want to shower upon him. They were looking for a political sort of Messiah, one who would deliver them from their Roman oppressors. But Jesus was not that kind of Messiah. He had come to deal with a problem far greater than the Roman Empire.

After such a busy night, Jesus would have been exhausted. Yet he woke up while it was still dark in order to find a quiet place to pray. What a picture of the absolute urgency of prayer. Many of us have a tendency to stay up too late, trying to get some work done or indulging in the various entertainments available to us, and this makes it difficult to rise early enough to meet with the Lord in prayer. It is so easy to neglect prayer. It is so easy to let it get squeezed out by our work, our sleep and our play. But if Jesus Christ himself found prayer to be so vital in his life, if he stole from his much-needed sleep to make time for prayer, then how much more important is it for us to set aside regular time to pray.

When Simon Peter and the other disciples discovered that Jesus had left the house, they went looking for him. They were excited. They had just seen Jesus do all sorts of amazing things, and there were many others clamoring to see him, seeking his help. Things were really starting to happen. The disciples must have wondered why Jesus wasn't taking full advantage of this great opportunity.

When you read the Gospels, you will notice that Jesus never goes out looking for sick and demon-possessed people. They always come to him. He helps many of them, but healing was not his primary mission. Most of the people he healed probably ended up getting sick again. And all of them eventually died. The reason why Jesus' ministry was not primarily a healing ministry is because he did not come to provide a band-aid solution to our problems. He came to break the curse. He came to defeat death. As he says in verse 38, he came to preach a message, the gospel message, the message that declares that he is the way and the truth and the life.

Christ did not allow healing to become his primary mission. And the church must not allow social justice or acts of charity to become its primary mission. There will always be pressure in this direction. The church will always be pushed to show itself to be socially useful, because the preaching of the gospel is not something that the world values very highly. The world is very open to a church that is all about feeding the hungry, and helping the homeless, and providing other kinds of assistance to the poor and

needy. But a church that keeps its primary focus upon proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only hope for sinful people is a church that the world deems to be of little use.

It is not that we should deny the reality of human suffering or be callous to it. But we must not yield to the mindset that sees sickness and poverty as the sum total of humanity's problems. The reality is that these things are symptoms of a problem that runs much, much deeper. But people have a tendency to think of physical suffering in a very isolated way. If only cancer, or AIDS, or heart disease could be cured. If only poverty, or hunger, or drug abuse, could be brought to an end. If only the drug companies could invent a pill to make everyone perfectly happy all of the time. But we lose sight of the fact that, even if sicknesses are healed, even if poverty is overcome, even if hunger is ended, people will still meet the same end. Every one of us is going to die. And a great many are going to go to hell and suffer forever.

Jesus was not being insensitive when he rejected the opportunity to have a much wider healing ministry. He could have healed many more people than he did. But that was not why he had come. The people that he did heal, he healed out of compassion. They came asking for help, he was able to help, and so he helped them because of his love for them. And in this he is a real example for us. Do we care about people in the same way that Christ did? Do we love people to such an extent that we ache when we see them in pain or in need? Do we do whatever we reasonably can to help such people? Certainly our

Lord would have us do no less than that. And yet, he would also have us remember that man's ultimate need can only be met by the gospel that he came to preach. Jesus refused to allow healing to become the focus of his ministry because he wanted to help people in a much more significant, much more complete, much more permanent way.

The final healing in this passage involved a man suffering from leprosy. This may or may not have been what goes by the name leprosy today, a sickness also known as Hansen's disease. Hansen's disease is a chronic sickness that gradually deforms the body and causes it to waste away. It is generally agreed that the Bible's use of the term "leprosy" includes a variety of skin diseases, and not just Hansen's disease. Your Bible probably has a footnote to that effect at verse 40. The main reason for this conclusion is because the descriptions of leprosy in the Old Testament levitical laws include a number of symptoms that have nothing to do with Hansen's disease.

Whether or not the man in this passage suffered from Hansen's disease or from some other skin disease, he certainly had to endure a great deal of suffering. According to Old Testament law, a diagnosis of leprosy rendered a person ceremonially unclean, unfit to be a participant in the sanctuary, and a threat to the ceremonial purity of their fellow Israelites. As a result, lepers lived as outcasts. The law made this very clear, as we read in these verses from the book of Leviticus:

“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.” (Leviticus 13:45-46)

Even from a purely social standpoint, it was an awful thing to be a leper in Israel. Now perhaps you are wondering whether the law was cruel or unfair. After all, the people who contracted this disease were probably no worse than some of those who remained culturally pure. Why did God do this? Why make such a law, a law that seems to add insult to injury?

This is where we need to understand one of the ways in which Old Testament Israel was very unique. God had lavished a great blessing upon the people of Israel. He had graciously entered into a covenant with them and made his presence dwell in their midst. Israel was the only nation that lived in communion with the one true God. And therefore, Old Testament Israel served as a type, a picture, a foreshadowing, of heaven itself. Israel’s kingship, Israel’s temple, Israel’s worship, all pointed forward to the coming of the kingdom of God in its consummated state. And what will that kingdom be like? There will be no death in that kingdom. There will be no suffering, no sickness, no sin in that kingdom. Only the pure will dwell in it. As John writes in the book of Revelation,

“[N]othing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.” (Revelation 21:27)

The promise of heaven is the promise that God will heal the world completely. The reason why lepers had to be excluded from the fellowship in Israel is because they bore in their bodies the outward marks of the fall, the marks of death. Could they still experience God's saving grace? Absolutely. Those lepers who put their trust in God as their Savior will most certainly be in heaven. But in Israel, they were unclean and unfit to live in fellowship with the covenant community, because the nation of Israel served as a typological picture of heaven.

There is a great deal for us to consider in Jesus' encounter with this leprous man. For one thing, notice how Jesus healed him: he touched him. He did not have to do that. He could have just spoken the word, and the man would have been healed. Were it anyone other than Jesus, the leper's uncleanness would have been transferred upon contact, but the exact opposite happened here. Instead of Jesus becoming unclean, this man was made clean when Jesus touched him.

Upon healing the man, Jesus gave him two instructions. He commanded him not to tell anyone about this healing, and he told him to go to the priest and make the offering that the law required. He gave that second command because the law of Moses required those who had been healed of leprosy to fulfill certain religious requirements in order to be pronounced clean by the priest. And the procedure was not a small matter. It took eight days and required a trip all the way to Jerusalem so that the appropriate sacrifices could be made in the temple.

Mark does not indicate whether the man made that trip to Jerusalem, but he does tell us that he blatantly disobeyed Jesus' first command. He went out and spoke freely about what Jesus had done for him. As a result, Jesus' fame as a healer continued to grow, making it all the more difficult for him to keep the focus upon his preaching ministry. And notice the ironic result of this man's disobedience: lepers had to stay in desolate places because of their ceremonial impurity; but now it is Jesus who has to be out in desolate places. All because he had healed a leper. His healing of this man resulted in Christ having to experience one of the aspects of the man's leprosy: his exclusion from society. What a picture of how Christ has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows!

Does God care about you when you are sick and hurting? Yes he does. And if you ever doubt that, just take some time to reflect upon the compassion that Jesus showed to the people who came to him looking to be cured of their various ailments. Consider how he

helped those people even though doing so made it that much more difficult for him to accomplish the work that he had come to do.

And what was that work? What did Jesus come to do? In one sense, he did come to heal, but the healing that he offers goes far deeper than the healing of any physical ailment. You see, every one of us is a spiritual leper. Every one of us is unclean. Every one of us needs to be cleansed if we are to be granted access to the presence of God. And Jesus Christ is the only one who can provide the cleansing that we need. He is the healer of souls; the healer who makes unclean people clean; the healer who makes it possible for sin-sick people to live forever with the God who is the source of all life and health and peace.