

Our Compassionate Savior

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Mark 1:35-45

In the wake of disaster or tragedy it's not an uncommon event for the sitting President of the United States to travel to an affected location and survey the devastation. They oftentimes seek to encourage those affected by assuring that funds and resources will be sent to aid in the necessary relief efforts. But rarely, if ever, does the President roll up his sleeves and include himself in the work of cleaning up the mess – he's usually in and out. But that's not how Jesus responds to the spiritual disaster and tragedy in the hearts of men. He's not in and out; He "rolls up His sleeves" and gets neck deep in the wreckage of sin in human hearts. His purpose wasn't to send temporary relief, but rather to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). We find Him immersed in the ministry of prayer, preaching, and rescuing those tattered by the effect of the fall. That's the picture that I want you to have in your mind as we turn our attention to this morning's text. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says:

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." 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." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. 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. 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." 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. Mark 1:35–45

1. JESUS' FELLOWSHIP WITH THE FATHER WAS MARKED BY PRAYER (vs.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."

To say that the text before us this morning was preceded by a whirlwind day of ministry for Jesus would be an understatement. Jesus, accompanied by His four new disciples (Peter, Andrew, James

and John), had spent the afternoon in the synagogue teaching. Crowds grew and the excitement level soared as the sound of a man unlike the Scribes and Pharisees filled the air. Not only were the crowds captivated by the fact that Jesus taught with astounding authority, but verse 23 seems to infer that Jesus paused mid-sentence and cast an unclean spirit out of a man. So floored were those in attendance that verse 27 says, "And they were all amazed, so [much so] that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'" Verse 28 tells us that Jesus immediately became somewhat of an icon throughout the region of Galilee. In today's language we would say that the news about Jesus went viral.

That afternoon was followed by an equally stirring evening. After leaving the synagogue Jesus and His followers came to the home of Peter's mother-in-law who had been ill with a fever. Jesus, full of compassion, took her by the hand, raised her up in bed, and made her well. Tired from the events of the day, the group settled in for dinner as the sun dropped out of sight. There seems to be a still moment in the midst of a Sabbath day immersed in ministry - and then there's a knock at the door. You see the Sabbath ended at sundown and with the conclusion of the Sabbath the ill and deranged could be legally carried to Jesus. As the door to Peter's mother-in-law's home swung open, Jesus' view was flooded with a throng of sick and needy people. Mark tells us that the whole city was gathered together at the door. And the text says that Jesus spent the night, probably into the early hours of the morning, healing those with diseases and casting out demons. This is the context we need to keep in mind as we come to verse 35!

Verse 35 says, "Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." The thrill of the day had turned into the still of the night. While everyone else was sleeping, I can almost imagine Jesus lying quiet, but awake in bed, with the brokenness of humanity heavy on His heart and mind. Whether He slept or not we don't know, but sometime in the early hours of the morning Jesus noiselessly left the house and sought much needed fellowship with His Father. It's interesting to note that the Greek verb *prayed* in verse 35 is in the imperfect tense. Jesus didn't hop up in the morning for a brief prayer walk. The picture here is Jesus laboring in prayer through the early hours of the morning.

Jesus, though He is God, didn't live His life autonomous from the Father. If there was ever a picture of dependence on God we see it clearly in the face of Christ. Jesus often said things like, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord" John 5:19. And then just 11 verses later, "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" John 5:30. Likewise, in John 14:10 Jesus said, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works" John 14:10.

There is a great lesson for us here... If Jesus, the eternal, incarnate, Son of God, the One who is the exact imprint of the Father's nature (Hebrews 1:3), the One who spoke all things into existence and who holds all things together (Colossians 1:17), drew His strength, power, guidance, even His words from communing with the Father in prayer, how much more do we. J.C Ryle said:

Sinless as he was, He set us an example of diligent communion with God. If He who was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners thus prayed continually, how much more ought we who are compassed with infirmity? A praying Master like Jesus can have no prayerless servants. Those who ask little must expect to have little. Seeking little, they cannot be surprised if they possess little. It will always be found that when prayers are few, grace, strength, peace, and hope are small.¹

Jesus, though He was God in the flesh, recognized that in His humanity he was dependent on the Father for strength and power in His ministry. We come up with so many excuses for our shallow prayer lives. I think the number one excuse for our lack of prayer is oftentimes busyness. The problem isn't that we are too busy; the problem is that we've deceived ourselves into believing that we are as busy as we think we are. We don't fail to pray because we are pressed for time, we fail to pray because we've perverted our priorities. Adoniram Judson once said, "You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed." What a model Jesus has given us of humble dependence on God. Do you rise early in the morning and eagerly anticipate prayerful fellowship with God? Listen to how the psalmist talks about his fellowship with God in the morning:

O LORD, in the *morning* you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch. Evening and *morning* and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice, Psalm 55:17. But I will sing of your strength; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the *morning*. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress, Psalm 59:16. But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the *morning* my prayer comes before you, Psalm 88:13. Satisfy us in the *morning* with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days, Psalm 90:14. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the *morning*, more than watchmen for the *morning*, Psalms 130:6. Let me hear in the *morning* of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul, Psalm 143:8.

Look at verses 36-37. Mark says, "And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." Most of our translations miss the force of the original text here. A better translation would be - Simon and those who were with him "hunted Jesus down". Those of you who have children are well acquainted with this feeling. It can be difficult at times to even find a few minutes in solitude. Here is Jesus seeking solitude with His Father when His followers interrupt Him.

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 14.

Peter's response to Jesus communicates frustration – even the sound of a mild rebuke. Peter can't understand why in the world Jesus was retreating to pray when it seemed as if revival was breaking out the night before and the crowds have returned for more. What Peter is implying here is, "Jesus, you're going to miss the opportunity to capitalize on your popularity to promote your mission. There's an open door for ministry and you're out here hanging out by yourself." Peter's misunderstanding of Jesus' actions reveals a poor perspective that we can often have – when things are seemingly favorable, we don't need God's help.

It's interesting to note that Peter's interruption here is a foreshadowing of another interruption in Mark 8 where Peter tries to prevent Jesus from fulfilling His mission. Mark writes, "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" Mark 8:31–33.

Jesus was being directed by the desires of His Father rather than buy the responses of the people. Jesus knew that many of those who sought Him had no appetite to hear His word, but were only interested in His miracles. They cared not about His identity, but only what He could do for them. As a matter of fact, the word "seeking" or "looking for" occurs 10 times in the gospel of Mark in reference to Jesus and all 10 references are negative. "Seeking" connotes an attempt to determine and control rather than to submit and follow. In this respect, seeking for Jesus is not a virtue in the Gospel of Mark, nor are clamoring crowds a sign of success [in] ministry. Enthusiasm, not to be confused with faith, can actually oppose faith.² And for that reason, Jesus elevates the primacy of His mission - preaching the gospel!

2. JESUS' MINISTRY WAS FOCUSED ON PREACHING. (vs. 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." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Jesus' response to Peter and his search party almost seems a little counter-intuitive. You might expect Jesus to be excited by the news that everyone is looking for Him. But the clamoring crowd was not a sign of success to Jesus. Jesus knew that the crowd was curious, not convicted; happy, not humbled, aroused, but not repentant. Jesus wasn't interested in accumulating a mass of followers who were interested in His miracles but did not receive Him as their Messiah. Jesus told the crowd who

² James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 67.

followed him after He had fed the 5,000, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” John 6:26.

Jesus’ mission was that of an evangelist not a miracle worker. Ultimately, Jesus is the anointed Prophet that Isaiah writes about in Isaiah 61 when he says, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” And what is this prophet’s message? Look back at verse 15. Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” Mark 1:15.

Though the enthusiastic crowds would be content to use Jesus for his miracles; Peter and his companions misunderstood His ultimate purpose at this point, still Jesus remains undeterred from his mission. He had come to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), to heal our spiritual sickness, not just our physical infirmities. Jesus said of Himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” Matthew 20:28. That’s the message of the gospel. That is the message that must fill the content of our preaching. The anemic, man-centered preaching that emanates from pulpits in many churches on any given Sunday morning may bring people into the church, but it will never bring them into the Kingdom. The only way people ever come into God's Kingdom is by hearing His heralds proclaim a crucified King. Jesus came to fulfill a prophetic office, to be the Prophet greater than Moses, to be the Prophet who had been so long foretold.

It’s interesting to note that in verse 35 Jesus “goes out” to pray and in verse 39 he “goes out” to preach. What do we learn here? We learn that prayer and ministry are indispensable. Jesus, though he is God in the flesh, doesn’t extend himself outward in ministry without first communing with the Father, the source of His mission, in prayer. A wise man once asked me, “Will you spend more time talking to men about God or more time talking to God about men?” The question isn’t meant to suggest a false dichotomy – both are necessary. But it is interesting how spending time with God often compels us outward in ministry. Jesus came to preach the gospel. After those early hours in prayer with His father Jesus tells his young followers, “Let’s move on.”

3. JESUS’ HEART WAS MOVED WITH PITY. (vs. 40-45)

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. 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.” 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.

As Jesus moved on, preaching the gospel in other towns, so moved His rising popularity. Word about Jesus' power had breached the borders of Capernaum where Jesus first taught in the synagogue and had rippled outward into the surrounding region – even to the isolated huts of the leper colonies that were located outside of the cities in which Jesus taught. At least one leper was so enraptured at the thought of being cleansed by Jesus that he broke every social custom and legal regulation to come and throw himself at Jesus' feet.

This was a bold and incredibly offensive encounter because lepers have long been regarded as a grave threat to purity. If you are looking for an interesting read, Leviticus 13 and 14, serves as somewhat of an Old Testament dermatology manual. In these chapters, God gave strict guidelines to Moses about how leprosy (a general classification for a myriad of skin disorders) was to be treated. God said, "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. These regulations were really a display of God's grace. The Israelites lived in tents during the years that they wandered in the wilderness. The close proximity of the living arrangements meant that an outbreak of leprosy had the potential to spread quickly throughout the camp.

By Jesus' time, the regulations given to Moses by God had become grossly misapplied by rabbinical teaching. If a leper entered a house the house was considered unclean. If a leper stood under a tree, all who passed under it were considered unclean. It was illegal to greet a leper. If a leper came into contact with a clean person, the clean person would be deemed unclean. For that reason, a leper was required to stand at a distance, sometimes up to fifty paces depending on the direction of the wind, from a person without leprosy. Leprosy robbed a person of their name, occupation, family, fellowship, and worship community. They were oftentimes referred to as the "living dead". This isn't simply a description of an illness...it's a sentence.

Leprosy, like most diseases, was the subject of widespread superstition and fear. It was often regarded as divine punishment for sin - God's way of exiling the wicked. Remember the instance in John 9 when Jesus and His disciples encountered the man who had been blind from birth? How did they respond? They asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus [dispelling their superstition] answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" John 9:2–3.

That's the context we need to keep in mind in order to understand the offense of the leper's encounter with Jesus? This leper is breaking both law and custom when he comes to Jesus begging to be made clean. Notice that the leper doesn't question Jesus' ability to cleanse him, only His willingness. He says, "If you will, you can make me clean." The leper understood that he had no

hope apart from Jesus. Look at Jesus' response. Verse 41 says, "Moved with pity, [Jesus] stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean."

We would expect any pious Jew who was preoccupied with his cleanliness to recoil in protection and defense, but not Jesus. In Jesus' response we see that compassion replaces contempt. Rather than turning from the leper, Jesus turns to him. Notice also that Jesus is not only *able* to cleanse the leper, but *desirous* to do so. He says, "I will; be clean." May other times Jesus healed without a touch. But here, in this instance, Jesus, the theanthropic (God-man) reaches out his hand and touches the leper's spots. And unlike any other rabbi, Jesus isn't polluted by the leper's disease; rather the leper is cleansed by the contagious holiness of the Son of God.³ *Immediately* the leprosy left the man and he was made clean.

Jesus then gave the man two instructions:

1. Don't tell anyone that I have cleansed you.
2. Go and show yourself to the priest and follow the traditional rite of cleansing (Lev. 14)

We don't know if the man obeyed Jesus' instruction to go to the priest, but we do know that he disobeyed Jesus' instruction to not to tell anyone. In spite of Jesus' stern warning to the leper to "say nothing to anyone", verse 45 says that he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around. The leper is preaching, but unfortunately he's preaching the wrong message. You won't find Jesus in a miracle; you'll find Him at the cross.

While there is no justification for the leper's disobedience, it's interesting that when Jesus told this man to remain silent, he disobeyed and told everyone. Sadly, Jesus tells us to go and spread the news, and we are all too often disobediently silent. J.C. Ryle said, "The majority of Christians are far more inclined to be silent about their glorious master than confess Him before men. [Most of us] do not need a bridle as much as a spur."⁴

The Leper had more zeal than he had discretion. What was the result? Look at the end of verse 45. The result of the leper's disobedience was that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places. Can you see the irony here? Jesus began his ministry inside the city while the leper was on the outside - in the desolate places (wilderness). But notice where the two end up; Jesus, like a leper is now forced outside the city to the desolate places, while the leper is reestablished in the community. Jesus relieved the leper of his burden, but in publicizing the news, the leper imposes a burden on Jesus. Jesus and the leper have traded places. Mark 1:40-45 is a picture of the gospel.

³ James R. Edwards, 70.

⁴ J.C. Ryle, 20.

Friends:

1. We are the leper of Mark 1:40-45 - We are unclean because of our sin.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. Isaiah 64:6

3. Just like leprosy acts as an anesthetic, so our sin numbs us to the heinous nature of sin.

4. Just as leprosy was incurable and fatal, so our sin is incurable and fatal apart from Jesus Christ.

5. Jesus is merciful and compassionate towards sinners.

Jesus desires (is willing for) all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 2:4

6. Jesus is our substitute, He exchanges His righteousness for our guilt and sin.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:20–21

7. The moment that a sinner calls on the name of Christ, he is made clean.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 2 Corinthians 5:17

Mark's account of Jesus and the leper is a graphic image of the tragic realities of sin in the human heart. Like leprosy, sin infects the whole person, and it is ugly, loathsome, corrupting, contaminating, alienating, and incurable by man. But when a man or woman comes to Jesus in humble faith and repentance, Jesus pays our sin penalty, justifies us, and credits His righteousness to our account. Jesus is our substitute. What an exchange!

"Man of Sorrows!" what a name
For the Son of God, who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Lifted up was He to die;
"It is finished!" was His cry;
Now in Heav'n exalted high.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

When He comes, our glorious King,
All His ransomed home to bring,
Then anew His song we'll sing:
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was He;
"Full atonement!" can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Savior!