

## Willing Love

Mark 1:40-45

Today we begin a new series: “See How He Loved Them: Meditations on the Heart of Jesus.” And we’re going to be spending our time in the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, which work together to tell the single story of Jesus Christ, and how God is establishing his kingdom through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Israel’s long-awaited king.

The Gospels tell a true story. This is non-fiction. This happened in history. But the Gospels are more than just historical biography. They’re not just a record of what people said and thought about Jesus a long time ago. The Gospels are *theological* biography<sup>1</sup>—they tell us what *God* thinks of Jesus, what God *says* about his eternal Son’s life and work and how he deals with sin and establishes God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. More than any other portion of Scripture, the Gospels reveal to us the *person* of Jesus.

That’s easy to miss. Even in reading the Gospels. So often, our knowledge of Jesus gets stuck in the theoretical. We’re really good at learning information about Jesus. We might understand the cross and the intricacies of the atonement. We might be able to recite the creeds or spot heresy a mile away. And yet Jesus himself can feel cold and distant. Little more than a stained glass window, or a character in a history book.

Now, right information—right thinking, sound doctrine—is essential to a true knowledge of Jesus. But Jesus is more than a doctrine. *He’s a person*. A person whose heart is filled with love for us. A person who wants us to know his love, rest in his love, and emulate his love as we follow him each day. Knowing Jesus is more than understanding the significance of his work, or being able to explain his identity and nature; it’s beholding and enjoying his heart of love.

And one of the best ways to see the heart of Jesus is by looking carefully at how he treated others, which we can see in the stories of the Gospels. When we read these

---

<sup>1</sup> Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 30.

stories of Jesus afresh, with an eye toward his interaction with people, we behold his love.

In John 11, when Jesus arrived in Bethany, even though he knew he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, he wept. We remember that because it's one of the shortest verses in the Bible—"Jesus wept" (Jn. 11:35). But think about what's going on in that story. Jesus' heart broke for his friend. He grieved the evil of death, and the sorrow of the bereaved, and he wept. And when the Jews who were looking on saw this, many of whom were suspicious of Jesus, they couldn't help but recognize something special. Seeing this, "the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'" (Jn. 11:36). Jesus' heart was revealed in the way he treated others.

And that's what I want us to see this fall—to meditate on the heart of Jesus in his interaction with those around him, and see how he loved them—how he loves us. And we'll start with a story from the Gospel of Mark.

Mark is the shortest Gospel, and probably the earliest one written. It's known for its fast-paced portrait of Jesus' ministry, jumping quickly from scene to scene. And in our story, though we're still in the first chapter, Jesus has already begun his earthly ministry. Verse 39 summarizes, "And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons."

And as he's traveling, preaching, and healing, v. 40: "And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.'"

Stop and think about this man for a moment. Look at how he's described here. What do you see?

Do you see desperation? "He came to him, *imploring* him." Begging, pleading for help. What's so desperate about his situation? What kind of sickness are we talking about? One author writes:

Like HIV/AIDS [in the 80s and 90s], leprosy in ancient Israel was the most dreaded disease. Leprosy is a contagious skin disease that not only affects one's skin (its color, texture, and odor) and throat (it creates a raspy voice), but it also slowly destroys nerves that sense pain in our bodies. Thus, lepers often lost the tips of fingers and toes and broke limbs because they couldn't feel the weight of something heavy or the heat of the fire or the cut of a knife.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013), 204.

And the problem with leprosy was not just the physical decay of the body. It was extremely contagious, and made you ceremonially unclean. Which meant you were cut off from Israel's community and worship. Leviticus 13 describes it like 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. (Lev. 13:45-46)

Imagine being so contagious that you live your life in quarantine. One of our missionaries experienced that for several weeks—Rick Sacra, who contracted the Ebola virus disease while treating patients in Liberia during the breakout in 2014. Not only was his body shutting down, he was shut off from human contact. Even so, we live in a day of specialized hospitals, hazmat suits, and Skype. In the ancient world, there could be no human interaction. If anybody came close, you were required to shout out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' Stay away. That's desperation. He suffered not merely from physical disease but social isolation. He was an outcast with a slow death sentence.

But desperation is not the only thing we see in this man. We also see humility. He *kneeled* before Jesus. And we see *faith*. He doesn't say, "if you can do it, make me clean." He says, "you *can* make me clean." He believes in the power of Jesus. And note that he asks not just for healing, but for *cleansing*. That's not less than healing, but it is more. It's to be made ceremonially clean and be able to reenter Jewish society.

The man believes. He doesn't doubt Jesus' ability to cleanse and to heal. *But neither does he demand it.* And that's perhaps the most remarkable characteristic we see. "If you are willing, you can make me clean" (Mk. 1:40). From his posture of desperation, the man recognizes that it's not enough for Jesus to be able to heal; he has to be willing. He's under no obligation. He doesn't owe this man anything. If he is to experience cleansing, it will come entirely at the mercy and the initiation of Jesus. He has to be willing. And so with remarkable faith and humility, the leper defers to Jesus rather than demands.

And what we see in this story is that Jesus is willing. He is willing to love those whom this world despises and discards. And as the story unfolds, we see his willing love expressed in three ways. First, he *rehumanizes* the leper. Second, he *restores* him. And third, he *redirects* him.

## Willing Love Rehumanizes Us

First, willing love rehumanizes us. Leprosy was an inherently *dehumanizing* disease. It robbed its victims of their humanity. Their bodies ceased to work the way they were supposed to, and people ceased to treat them as fellow humans. They became problems to avoid instead of people to know and love. And we see that in all sorts of unsettling ways today.

You can't traffic in other people, buying and selling human slaves (of which there are approximately 40 million today globally<sup>3</sup>) without denying the humanity of those people. Treating them as less than human, as mere products or property. And it wasn't many decades ago that one of the qualifications for gathering in certain churches for worship was the color of your skin. Racism is an inherently dehumanizing disease. A denial of the full humanity of others. Remember the Civil Rights slogan: "I am a man."

Those who suffer from disability know what it's like to be dehumanized. In the U.S., roughly 70% of babies diagnosed prenatally with Down Syndrome are aborted, with rates much higher in other countries.<sup>4</sup> You can't do that unless you conclude that their disability makes them less than human. And even when the babies are born, people can have a hard time seeing their humanity. I knew a woman at our old church in Wheaton who, upon giving birth to a Down's baby, received *40 sympathy cards*. People were well meaning. It's a hard road. But how about 'Congratulations on this new life'?

There are so many ways for this fallen world to rob our humanity. And sin is the greatest culprit. We were made for relationship with God; sin gets in there and tries instead to enslave us to itself. Like acid, it eats away at the image of God within us, eroding our moral character and diluting our connection to God. When the psalmist found himself entangled in sin, he said "I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward [God]" (Ps. 73:22). Sin robs us of our humanity.

And when we encounter someone who is to us more of a problem than a person, what do we do? We recoil. We hide our faces. We pretend we don't see them. We treat them like a leper, despised and discarded. Just stay away.

But how does Jesus respond? Look at v. 41, and think carefully about what Jesus is doing. "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to

---

<sup>3</sup> ["Forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking."](#) International Labour Organization. Accessed Sept. 13, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Brittany Raymer, "[A World with No Down syndrome Babies?](#)" *Focus on the Family*, 2018.

him, ‘I am willing; be clean.’” Where most people would recoil at a leper, Jesus moves toward him and touches him. He treats him like a person, not a pariah.

You don’t touch a leper! They’ll make you sick; they’ll make you ceremonially unclean! Imagine the shock of the crowd as he reaches out. Imagine the flood of emotion for the leper, as he feels the warmth of another human touch him after likely years of never being touched.

Jesus didn’t have to touch him to heal him. He could have just said the word. But he loved him, and so he did. Jesus, in his willing love, rehumanizes the leper. And he does the same for us.

Do you realize that when Jesus sees the ugly or broken parts of our lives, of our hearts, those things about us that the world despises and discards, that we think we have to hide in order to be loved—when Jesus sees that, he doesn’t recoil in disgust? He moves toward us in love. He is willing to love what this world despises and discards. Are we willing to let that love in? To risk exposing our hearts to him? He sees it anyway. And he responds with pity and compassion, even when some of it’s our fault. He moves toward us in love; are we willing to receive that?

And are we willing to reflect it in loving others? Those who would normally cause us to recoil? Whose humanity has been robbed by poverty, disease, oppression, or sin? Those in desperate need of another human touch?

There was another mother at our church in Wheaton who had a child with a significant disability, including some pretty significant facial abnormalities. And as people would come up with excitement to see the baby in the car seat, this mother would watch with pain as their expression invariably changed to shock when they glimpsed the newborn. Except for one child—a child who with excitement ran up and saw only a beautiful baby. And who proceeded to play with that baby, making googly faces and trying to get it to laugh. A child with Down Syndrome.

You want to see what the humanizing love of Jesus looks like, you watch the way that a Down’s person treats others. Willing love rehumanizes us.

### **Willing Love Restores Us**

Second, willing love restores us. Jesus didn’t just feel pity for the leper. He *took* pity on him. He did something about his desperate situation—something only he could do. He addressed the problem directly, and restored him. He was willing to heal and cleanse. Look again at vv. 41-42: “Moved with pity, he stretched out his

hand and touched him and said to him, ‘I am willing; be clean.’ And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.”

This is the incredible power of Jesus. He has authority over sickness and disease. We spend billions upon billions of dollars on healthcare every year. All Jesus has to do is say the word. He has authority to take the newness of life God promises for the end, and as a sign of that future hope, to break into the present with it, bringing healing for those who believe.

But here’s the thing: he doesn’t just have the authority and the power to do it. He has the desire. He is *willing*. He wants to restore his people.

And that’s what he does here. He doesn’t just heal the disease, he restores the man’s life. His leprosy didn’t just wrack his body, it prevented him from worship and cut him off from community. And so notice how Jesus doesn’t stop with healing him. He instructs him in v. 44 to “go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” Now after the cross, Jesus will do away with all such sacrifices, because he will have fulfilled them all in his own sacrifice. But here, this offering is the means of the leper’s reentry into Jewish society—no longer as an outcast, but now as a man. He’s restored. All that his leprosy robbed him of, Jesus willingly restored.

And that’s what he’s willing to do for all of us—to restore *all* that our sin and the brokenness of this fallen world has robbed us of—our dignity, our health, our relationships, our possessions, our purity, our peace, and most importantly, the presence of God in the midst of his people. More than that, Jesus is willing to restore to God himself what our sin and the brokenness of this world has robbed *him* of—namely, the fullness of his unique worthiness and incomparable glory displayed throughout all creation through a people for his own possession.

But what does that restoration look like? Sometimes we see that restoration miraculously and immediately, as in this story. Sometimes it comes in small and gradual ways: the common grace of modern medicine; the normal means of grace through which God changes our lives; the hard and deliberate work of reconciliation and reform. And still sometimes, that restoration waits for the end: the new heavens and new earth, wherein righteousness dwells. Where there will be no more sickness or sin, no more sorrow, no more racism or poverty, no more systemic oppression, no more disease, disability, or death. Rather there will be Jesus, seated at the right hand of the Father, and eternal joy in him.

It will come. And if we're tempted to doubt that, to question Jesus' willingness to restore us from all that this fallen world has stolen, remember that he's already accomplished the hardest part—the cross and resurrection. It was at the cross where Jesus dealt with the root problem—where all rebellion and brokenness ultimately comes from—human sin. And dealing with it cost him everything. He willingly died in our place, as our substitute—bearing our sin, bearing our sickness, our sorrows—in order to exhaust his Father's holy and just wrath against our sin, and to bring forgiveness and wholeness and new life through his resurrection for all who believe. So if Jesus is willing to do that for us—the hardest thing—will he not return to finish his restoration in the end? If God was willing to give for us that which was most precious to him—his own eternal Son—will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:32).

Jesus is willing to restore what this world is eager to discard. And again, the question is, are we willing to receive that? Are we willing to trust him? To acknowledge the breadth and depth of our brokenness—that we need not just forgiveness, but cleansing and healing, reconciliation and repentance. And to acknowledge that we can't fix this ourselves. And are we willing to love others in the same way? To work for the restoration of *all* that this fallen world has robbed them of—to care not only for souls and where they end up when they die, but for bodies, for hearts, relationships, for justice and mercy by bearing witness to Christ in both word and deed? As 1 John 3:17 says, “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?”

We need a Savior willing to restore us. And in his love, Jesus does just that.

### **Willing Love Redirects Us**

But finally, willing love also redirects us. Look again at vv. 43-44: “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.’” Now of course the man ignores that first instruction, and instead, “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” (v. 45).

So the question is (that has honestly plagued readers of Mark for centuries): why doesn't Jesus want people to know who he is, or that he has the power to heal? Why sternly charge the man to be silent about him, or try to keep his ministry a

secret? He came to establish his kingdom; should you send some flyers or announcements, let people know you're in town?

When Jesus told the people he encountered or the people he healed not to go telling everyone else yet, that was his way of flying under the radar of Israel's misplaced expectations about the Messiah. Jesus knew the expectations of Israel—that they wanted a king who would take back Jerusalem and Judea with a sword, and get rid of Roman oppression, such that if they caught wind of a new king, some would try to take him and make him king by force (cf. Jn 6:15). He couldn't risk that, because he came to establish his kingdom not with a sword, but a cross.

And he knew the pattern of people's hearts—that once they tasted bread from heaven, or experienced miraculous healing, they would simply want *more of that* and miss the bigger purpose of the kingdom—which is about way more than miraculous healing and ceremonial cleansing. (cf. Jn. 6:26; Mk. 1:35-39).

And so Jesus isn't simply trying to protect himself by asking the man for his silence; he's trying to protect the man. Because while Jesus is willing to move toward him in love, and heal him in love, he is *not* willing to let him get too excited about small things. And compared to what he is accomplishing through his kingdom, healing and cleansing is a small thing. It's great, but it's not the main point. Willing love redirects us from the small things, so we don't miss the main point.

And that main point is *God*. God's glory, God's rule, God's presence, God's blessing. There is no greater satisfaction than knowing God and enjoying him forever. There is no greater gift God can give us than himself. No greater treasure than to know Christ and glorify him.

Jesus is not willing to let us become satisfied or fixated on small things. He cares about small things, but he wants us to be enthralled with the main thing—with God.

So do we allow ourselves in life or in faith to get too excited, to distracted, too focused on small things? Am I more excited when God helps pay my overdue bill, than I am about the fact that Christ paid my debt of sin forever? Am I more eager to catch up on Netflix than I am to spend time with God through his Word? Are we willing to let Jesus' love redirect us toward the main thing, both in our affections for him, and in our witness to others?

We need to care about restoration and be holistic in our witness, to preach the gospel in both word and deed: explaining to others who Jesus is and what he's

done to deal with our sin through his life, death, and resurrection, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16), while at the same time loving them in real and tangible ways—validating their pain and struggles, helping, serving, advocating, assisting. So share the gospel, but make a phone call and see if you can get them a job interview, too. Or provide a meal. Or watch their kids. Or drive them to the doctor. Tangible love with a gospel purpose.

But we need to keep it in perspective, that there is an eternal scope to God’s love. We need to remember, as Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert put it, that “there is something worse than death and something better than human flourishing”—there is God, and the terror of being separated from him forever, or the eternal satisfaction and glory of knowing and being known by him. “If we hope only for renewed cities and restored bodies in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied.”<sup>5</sup> The love of God in Christ is so much bigger, directing us to God through the cross and resurrection toward that final restoration when everything will be made new. Willing love redirects us.

Jesus is willing to love what this world despises and discards. His love rehumanizes, it restores, it redirects. That’s the heart of Jesus for us. May it be our heart as well.

---

<sup>5</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 23.