

THE HEALER OF HURTS

by Ray C. Stedman

We resume our study of the gospel of Mark, this remarkable witness concerning the servant of God -- his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ -- as seen through the eyes of Mark and Peter.

Last time we came to the close of the first natural division of this gospel -- in Verse 39 of Chapter 1. Mark is easy to follow, because he gives us certain geographical clues which mark the divisions of this gospel. He often ends a section with a summary statement like the one in Verse 39: "And he [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons." The theme of that section, as we saw, is the authority of the servant -- the authority which Jesus exercised. He commanded the disciples to follow him, and they came. He commanded the evil spirits, and they obeyed him. He commanded the fever to depart, and it left.

The next natural division follows in Chapter 1, Verse 40, through Chapter 3, Verse 6. The theme of this division is the knowledge of humanity which Jesus displayed, his perceptive understanding of who we are, and why we act the way we do. John the disciple precisely expresses this in the second chapter of his gospel when he says,

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man. {John 2:23-25 RSV}

That is a tremendously significant statement. It says that Jesus knew every individual who came to him. That is why he could say to Nathanael, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you," {John 1:48b RSV}. That is why he could tell Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, and why he could say to the woman at the well, "... you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband;" {John 4:18a RSV}. He knew them because he knew what was in man, i.e., he understood humanity, how God made us, who we are. That is the theme Mark develops in this next section.

The first division encompasses two incidents in the life of Jesus: the healing of a leper, and the healing of a paralytic. These are tied together by the way they reveal truth about our basic humanity, and about Jesus' perfect knowledge of this human nature. Let us look at this healing of the leper, Mark 1:40-42. Matthew tells us that this incident took place immediately after the delivery of the Sermon on the Mount. As Jesus was coming down the mountain, this leper met him. Mark tells of the incident in this way:

And a leper came to him beseeching 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. {Mark 1:40-42 RSV}

Mark highlights two impressive things about this miracle for us. First, the appeal of this leper to the will of Jesus. This is unique among the miracles. Second, the compassionate response with which Jesus answers this beseeching appeal. It is very significant that this leper said, "If you will, you can make me clean."

Years ago a young man in this congregation came up to me. He had become very interested in the healing power of God, and was involved in a movement which was teaching that healing is provided by God for every physical ailment we believers have, that it is wrong not to be well, and that we do not have to ask God whether he wants to heal us or not. This young man told me it is a lack of faith to pray, "If it be your will, heal me." He said we should claim our healing, and was very definite about it. I remember pointing out this incident to him -- that the leper came to Jesus and said, "If you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus did not rebuke him

or tell him he had approached him in the wrong way, or that he ought to claim his healing. In fact, you never find this idea in Scripture.

I think this indicates something of an awareness on the leper's part of a divine purpose there may have been in his affliction. It may, perhaps, be difficult for some of us to handle the concept, but the Scriptures are very clear that sometimes God wills us to be sick. Not that this is the expression of his ultimate desire for men, but that, given the circumstances in which we now live and the fallen nature of humanity, there are times when God wills for his children to pass through physical affliction. You see numerous examples of this in the Scriptures. Paul came before the Lord and asked three times for the removal of a physical "thorn in the flesh," {2 Cor 12:7}. Finally the answer came, "My grace is sufficient for you," {2 Cor 12:9 RSV}. Paul understood that God wanted him to put up with it, learn how to handle it by the grace of God. So it is clear that it is not the teaching of Scripture that everybody must be healed.

This leper is a case in point. Evidently he sensed some purpose in this, and when he said, "If you will, you can make me clean," he did not mean by that, "If you're in a good mood at present..." He meant, rather, "If it is not out of line with the purpose of God, if it is not violating some cosmic program God is working out, then you can make me clean." The answer of Jesus is very positive: "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I will, be clean.'" That "I will" is like a green light from God. It says the time has come for the healing to occur. Whatever purpose the leprosy may have served, it has been accomplished, and the time was come to set it aside. "I will; be thou clean."

Mark says the immediate motive which moved Jesus was pity, compassion. "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him." I love that "touch," which only Mark adds here. He records that the response of Jesus' heart was to touch him. Now, he was not drawn to him naturally. This was doubtless a very repulsive-looking man. Luke records, "he was full of leprosy," {Luke 5:19}. William Barclay describes what a leper looks like:

The whole appearance of the face is changed, till the man loses his human appearance and looks, as the ancients said, "like a lion or a satyr". The nodules grow larger and larger. They ulcerate. become staring. The voice becomes hoarse, and the breath wheezes because of the ulceration of the vocal chords. The hands and the feet always ulcerate. Slowly the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of the disease is nine years, and it ends in mental decay, coma, and ultimately death. The sufferer becomes utterly repulsive -- both to himself and to others.

Of course, worst of all is the sense of worthlessness and despair this condition creates, which separates the sufferer from all contact with humanity. It was this kind of man who came up to Jesus and, breaking the law, dared to kneel before him and beseech him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." The heart of Jesus was moved. He reached out and lovingly touched him, and at that touch the leprosy vanished and his flesh was strong and clean once again. This is a beautiful incident, illustrating the power of Jesus.

But Mark immediately moves on to reveal to us the purpose which God intended for this incident, and which our Lord saw in it, Verses 43-44:

And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people. {Mark 1:43-44 RSV}

Unfortunately, the Revised Standard Version confuses things a bit by substituting the words "to the people" for what the Greek really says. If you refer to the footnote, you see that the Greek text is: "Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them," i.e., the priests. This indicates what Jesus saw as the reason for this occurrence and the purpose he intended to accomplish. It was to be a witness to the priests, for they would be astonished when this man appeared to them and asked for the sacrifices Moses had commanded in the book of Leviticus. You can see them, puzzled when this man would come, wondering what to do, going to their libraries and getting down their books from the shelves, thumbing through them and saying to one another, "What will we do? There's never been anything like this since the days of Elisha!" That's the last record of anyone's being cleansed from leprosy. And even then it wasn't an

Israelite, but a Gentile, Naaman, commander of the Syrian armies. They would not know what to do.

Our Lord intended, clearly, that this would be for them a manifestation of a sign of the Messiah. Everyone in Israel, and especially the priests, knew that leprosy was always a symbol of the evil and sin of man, and that God used it as judgment, at times, in order to bring out in vivid, visible form what evil and sin is like in us. Now here was One who had power to cleanse the leper. Isaiah had predicted that when Messiah came, he would do certain physical miracles. The eyes of the blind would be opened, the lame would leap like the hart, the tongue of the dumb would sing, and lepers would be cleansed and healed. Now here is one of the signs of the Messiah, which our Lord intended the priests should see, as a witness to them of who he was.

But all of this was lost by the disobedience of this leper. Mark records it in 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 the country; and people came to him from every quarter. {Mark 1:45 RSV}

This leper proved to be a blabbermouth. He could not keep quiet, even though Jesus had strictly charged him, i.e., made clear to him that it was an important matter that he not tell anyone but the priests, that his witness go to the official representatives of the nation as a sign to them that Messiah was at hand. But all this was lost, because the man succumbed to the inner desire of his heart to tell everyone what had happened. Now, it is understandable that he would feel this way. He had been cleansed from this loathsome, foul disease, and he longed to tell of it. And I do not think our Lord ever intended that he should not tell of it, but only after he had borne witness to the priests. But this man could not wait, and in his eagerness he began to blaze the story abroad. I am sure he sang the praises of Jesus in doing so, but nevertheless this account is a careful testimony to us that obedience is better than praise.

We do this kind of thing very frequently. We do not need to point our finger at this man. I am amazed at how easily we set aside the Scriptures and disobey what God has said. We come up with some substitute -- and praise God for it -- when in reality it is disobedience. I have seen expensive, ornate buildings with bronze plates which say, "Erected to the glory of God," when God does not care for buildings at all. He cares for people. He never told us to put up any building for his glory. It is what happens in the lives of his people that glorifies God, not buildings erected to his name. So this man stands as a testimony to us of the need to obey what our Lord says, taking him simply at his word and doing what he says. He will be responsible for the results.

Because this leper did not do this, he hindered and limited the ministry of Jesus. Perhaps his ministry at Jerusalem would have been much more effective and powerful had this man done what Jesus asked him to do. But instead, unwittingly and unintentionally, he nevertheless violated the word of the Lord. As a result a limitation was set upon Jesus. He could not come into the cities but had to stay in the countryside.

Mark moves right on to another healing, this time the healing of the paralytic, Chapter 2. It falls into two major movements, the first centering around the faith of five men:

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room for them, not even about the door; and he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." {Mark 2:1-5 RSV}

The obvious thing Mark underscores for us here is the faith of these five men, the determination of their faith. They stand as an encouragement to us to exercise this kind of faith. It is important in understanding this story to see that this was not a healing service to which they came. Mark particularly tells us that Jesus was preaching the word, and he was doing it in a house, not in the street. Relating this to the context, it is clear that he was avoiding the streets, because they had been turned into a healing campaign. Everywhere he went people besieged him with requests for healing and the casting out of demons, so that he was unable to do what he had

come to do primarily, which was to preach the word.

So he had isolated himself in a house, and the room was jammed full of people -- even the doorway blocked, as people crowded around to hear the words of Jesus. But there were five men, the four who brought him and the man himself, who were determined to reach Jesus. Our Lord uses this incident to suggest to us that God is always open to the needs of people, regardless of whether they are physical, spiritual, or emotional. If their desire is strong enough he will respond, despite the fact that it is not on the program. I love the times when the Spirit of God ignores the program! And this was not on the program for this meeting. But here were five men who longed to reach the Lord, were determined to do so, and their faith is a testimony and an encouragement to us.

This incident is a beautiful commentary on some words of Jesus that Matthew records. In Matthew 11:12 Jesus says, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force," {Matt 11:12 RSV}. Many have wondered what he meant by that. But God is simply saying, "Look, I'm ready to give to those who really want something." If you really want it, then God will give it, even though it is an interruption of the program he had in mind. So these men came -- violently -- ready to take what they knew God was offering at that moment and, in a sense, they took it by force.

What is underscored here, of course, is the quality of faith. This is what faith is all about. There are three remarkable and beautiful aspects of it here:

First, these men *dared to do the difficult*. That is where faith always manifests itself. It was not easy to bring this man to the Lord. They had to carry him, who knows how far, through the streets of the city -- perhaps many blocks. And when they found the doorway blocked, they had to carry him up an outside stairway to the roof. We do not know how heavy he was, but it is not easy to carry a full-grown man up a flight of stairs. Yet these men managed this difficult task. They dared to do the difficult. What an illustration this incident gives us of bringing men to Christ!

Then, notice that they *dared to do the unorthodox*. They were not limited by the fact that it was not at all customary to break up a roof. When they found that the door was blocked, they did not sit down, as we probably would have done, and appoint a committee to research the various ways to get to Jesus. No, they just did what was necessary, and risked the disapproval not only of the owner of the house but also every person there by interrupting the meeting in order to get their friend to Jesus. The remarkable thing is that Jesus never rebuked them, never criticized their interruption. He never does. There is never an incident recorded in which Jesus got uptight or disturbed about an interruption by someone intent on receiving something from him and pressing through to him despite the disapproval of those around. These men dared to do the unorthodox.

I love that quality in Christianity. I hope we never lose it -- this ability to defy the status quo. Nothing is more deadly in a church than the attitude -- which can so easily set in -- which has been expressed as, "Come weal or woe; our status is quo" because the members are afraid to do anything which might be criticized. But these men dared to do the unorthodox.

Third, they *dared to do the costly*. Somebody had to pay for that roof. Imagine the face of the owner, sitting there at the feet of Jesus, when he hears this scratching on the roof. He looks up and, to his amazement, the tiles begin to move. Then daylight appears, and suddenly he has a large hole in his roof! I do not know what his thoughts were. He probably wondered if his Homeowners Policy would cover it or not. Or maybe he was mentally adding up the bill to present to these men. But somebody had to pay that bill, somebody repaired that roof, and surely it was one, if not all, of these men. They dared to do the costly. That is faith! They laid it on the line -- at cost to themselves. What a witness this is to what it takes to bring people to Christ!

Mark has emphasized all this in order that we might move to the second part of the passage, which gathers around the protest of the scribes. Here we learn the heart of this story. Jesus had said to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." Verses 6-12:

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And

immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- he said to the paralytic -- "I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" {Mark 2:6-12 RSV}

It is evident from the words of Jesus that this paralysis was caused by some moral difficulty. Our Lord's insight is accurate and keen. He understood instantly what was wrong with this man. Notice that he does not touch on the physical at first; he goes right to the heart of the problem: "Son, your sins are forgiven." In fact, Matthew tells us he said, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven," {cf, Matt 9:2 KJV}. This indicates that the paralysis was what doctors sometimes call "emotionally induced" illness. That is, something in this man's past or present, some attitude he harbored, some feeling he indulged, was causing the paralysis.

Doctors have said that 50 percent of all the illnesses they treat are emotionally caused. Not that they are not genuine -- the people who have them really are ill -- but they are caused by some emotional problem. Many things can result in this type of illness: A bitter spirit, a lack of forgiveness, harboring a grudge against somebody, will, over a long span of years, turn the life sour and affect the body and mind to the point where it loses its capacity to function. We know that ulcers are emotionally induced, primarily. Somebody has said that ulcers are caused not by what you eat, but by what is eating you! Guilt can affect us physically. Perhaps this man had done injury to someone, and bore a heavy burden of guilt, was unable to forgive himself, and looked back upon the past and dwelt on it until it gripped his body, affected it so that it would not function.

Jesus, knowing that this man was paralyzed because of some moral problem, immediately went to the heart of the problem. He touched him and said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." You see, if he had simply healed the paralysis, without having forgiven the sin, there is no doubt that the paralysis would have returned, sooner or later. This is what accounts for many of the so-called miracles of healing in the healing services we hear and read about today. These involve emotionally induced problems -- physical, yes, but caused by some emotional problem. And the momentary atmosphere of excitement and faith generated by such a meeting is enough oftentimes to effect a temporary change. People may be freed, for the moment, from their difficulty, and give witness to that effect. But medical investigators have proven again and again that within a matter of days those same illnesses return. (You do not hear so much of that -- only of the healings!) But our Lord went to the heart of the matter and forgave this man's sins, so that the healing he received would last, and the paralysis never return.

This was a problem to the scribes sitting nearby. They were puzzled, and our Lord understood that. Notice how Mark puts this. These scribes were questioning "in their hearts." They did not say anything; they did not even talk among themselves. Jesus read their thoughts, read their hearts. He knew in his spirit that they questioned within themselves. You can imagine the startled looks on their faces when our Lord turned to them and said, "Why are you fellows thinking that way? I know what you're thinking."

I know that some interpret this as evidence of what they call the omniscience of Jesus, and conclude that he was acting as God here. I do not think so. We must never forget that there was an occasion when he said specifically that he, as a man, did not know something. He did not know the hour of his return; only the Father knew that. No, this is not omniscience; this is, rather, the manifestation of the spiritual gift of discernment in its fullest degree. You see Peter doing the same thing when Ananias and Sapphira came to him. He knew all about their fraud, even though no one had told him. When Paul was confronted on the island of Cyprus by a magician named Bar-Jesus, he knew what was going on in that man's life, knew his attitude of heart. This is the gift of discernment.

Our Lord knew what was going on in the minds of these scribes, and so he proposed to them a test: "Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or 'Take up your bed and walk?'" Notice how he put that. He did not say, "Which is easier to do?" Because obviously it is much easier to heal a man physically than to forgive his sins. Only God can forgive sins; they are right about that. Only the offended can remit the offense, and only

God has the right to forgive sins. It is much easier to heal a body -- a physician can do that. But he said, "Which is easier to say?" Obviously any charlatan, any religious racketeer, can say to a man, "Your sins are forgiven," and no one could prove whether it happened or not. So that is easier to say. Our Lord is saying to these men, "You question my ability to forgive sins. I'm going to demonstrate to you that I not only have the power to forgive sins, but the power to heal as well -- which is easier to do, but harder to say because you can verify that." And turning to the paralyzed man, he said, "Rise, take up your bed and go home." And the man obeyed, instantly healed. Before their eyes he walked out of their midst. And all the people -- except for the scribes -- rejoiced and gave glory to God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

What amazed them? Not merely the healing. They had seen healing miracles before. What amazed them was Jesus' understanding of the problems of human nature. What amazed them was the fact that he understood so clearly that physical and emotional problems are often caused by spiritual disease and maladjustment, that the center of security and deliverance and liberty lies in what goes on between a man and God. This is what amazed them.

This is the lesson we find so difficult to learn. We are all seeking the secret of adequacy. How can you handle life? How can you be poised and confident and courageous? How can you be freed from inner tensions and turmoil and anxiety and insecurity? We struggle to try to do it on the level of our relationships with one another, trying to heal our relationship with a neighbor, or our wife, or children. And we ignore this great revelation to us. Our healing begins with our relationship to God. Only the man who has heard Jesus say, "Your sins are forgiven," is free from that tension within, thus enabling him to cope with life outside.

As I was saying to a group of parents yesterday, the amazing truth is that you will treat other people just as you think God treats you, and you cannot escape that. Not the way you say God treats you -- using all the religious phrases and quoting all the nice biblical verses. God knows, and your heart knows, that it is not true, and it will all come out in the way you treat others. If you are harsh and judgmental and critical to them, demanding perfection from them, that is the way you think God is toward you. If you see him as loving, understanding, forgiving, patient, then that is how you will treat others. There is no way around it. It all starts with the kind of relationship you have with him.

This is why Jesus went right to the heart of the problem, and said, "Your sins are forgiven." Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians that you are chosen of God, and precious. Do you think of yourself that way? Every morning when you wake up, that is what you ought to say of yourself -- chosen of God, precious to him. Because that will set your spirit free to be available to help somebody else with his problems, for all your inner tensions and turmoil are settled. That is liberty, that is freedom, that is where confidence is born -- in faith that God himself lives in you, and is ready to work through you, taking the ordinary things you do and imparting to them the touch of heaven, so that unusual, extraordinary results will accrue which perhaps you know nothing about.

This is how God intends us to live, and is what this little incident sets forth. Our Lord understood the need of this man and instantly went to the heart of it. He said, "Son, the thing you need more than anything else is forgiveness of sins. Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven." to dismiss the paralysis. That is what God can do in your life and mine.

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