

CLOSE ENOUGH TO CARE

SERIES: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

By Doug Goins

For two-thousand years people have been fascinated with Jesus. We are attracted to his compassionate awareness of our humanity. He understands us, even better than we understand ourselves. We would all like to be free from inner turmoil, tension, anxiety, and insecurity—to be confident, courageous people. But if we are honest, we know how much we struggle in those areas, in relationships with family, with co-workers, and with friends. We want to be poised people and live life to the fullest, but we fall short.

In failure we turn to Jesus as the one who understands. We turn to the One who can heal all the hurts that life brings. He understands and heals because he is willing to enter into the hurt. He doesn't hold himself distant and aloof, but instead he crosses boundaries, whether social, religious, or physical and comes close enough to enter into our pain and bring healing.

Mark 1:40-2:12 ties together two encounters in the life of Jesus. The first concerns a man who is dying of leprosy, and the second is a helpless paraplegic. Both stories reveal truth about our basic humanity and about Jesus' empathic, loving concern for our struggles.

Jesus cleanses and heals the leper

And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away.... (Mark 1:40-43)

Luke was a doctor as well as an historian, and his account of this story (Luke 5:12-16) tells us that the man's leprosy was so advanced that he was very close to death. Understanding that this man was in the terminal stage of leprosy can help us comprehend why he was so desperate that he would break through the crowd and collapse in a heap at the feet of Jesus. At that time, leprosy was a terrifying disease. It was viewed much like our own global AIDs epidemic, especially in the early years when we were so fearful of physical contact with anyone with AID's. However, leprosy was more than a physical disease. Anyone with leprosy was made a social outcast. Known as "lepers," they were not allowed to live in their own communities and were unable to touch anything or anyone for fear of spreading the disease. Lepers were cut off from the synagogue and wherever they went they were met with the cry "Unclean! Unclean!" In effect, lepers were so shunned by the world they would end up hating and despising themselves. They were totally alone in the frightening isolation of uncleanness and hopelessness.

Consider verse 40 again with the understanding of just how loathsome this leper must have felt, and uncertain about how Jesus would respond to him. The leper bursts through the crowd, seeking to be healed, yet he remains hesitant. He expresses uncertainty about whether Jesus will want to heal him when he says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." He takes a chance that Jesus will be merciful and gracious and that Jesus will exercise the power to heal him. Also notice in these few verses the Lord's immediate and forceful response to this man's need, a response that betrays his strong emotional reaction to this man's leprosy.

Mark's gospel tells us more about the emotional life of Jesus than any of the four gospels because Mark recorded Peter's account of Jesus' life. Peter was known as the passionate, emotional and demonstrative one. Of all the witnesses, Peter would remember the emotional responses of Jesus—his honest and raw response to what he saw and heard. In the Greek we see two different readings for the phrase, "moved with compassion." One meaning is that he was "moved to the guts," displaying a deep, visceral reaction when he saw the man's leprosy. However, early manuscripts used the words "filled with anger" when he looked at the man who had been ravaged by leprosy. A deeper appreciation of Jesus' visceral, angry reaction to the leprosy can be made by considering Jesus' two directives to the man in verse 43. Mark tells us "Jesus sternly warned him." Literally, that the Lord angrily raged at him. Then in the next phrase, Jesus "immediately sent him away." Literally, that he *drove* him out.

Both express deep emotion that is almost inarticulate. In the first case, the phrase used describes a groaning, moaning or murmuring in that the agony is so deep it can't even be put into words. In the second case, the phrase also displays the necessity for someone to leave, acted out literally by physically driving a person away. Put all of that together and the picture we see is that Jesus was incredibly and deeply moved by the presence of human suffering. The anger and frustration that Jesus felt was not toward the man, but the ravages of the leprosy and the tragedy of this physical evil that had so disfigured this man. God created human beings in his own image, and Jesus was revolted at the leprosy, this physical evil that had ravaged this human being almost beyond recognition.

Michael Greene taught a course on the gospel of Mark up at Regent College in Vancouver a few years ago, and he said that of all diseases, leprosy is the most graphic picture of sin—sin that ravages the soul. Beginning with just a small spot the leprosy spreads, desensitizes. Then it deforms and defaces. Like sin, it isolates and separates one from family, from work, from community, even God.

Notice that Jesus' concern was expressed in his touch. He places the touch of love ahead of ritual, regulation and social norm and his compassion trumps propriety and even personal safety. This was probably the first time that another clean human had touched this social outcast in a very long time. Over the years I have taken teams from PBC into prisons in Mexico and Columbia to minister. It has always struck me how desperate the prisoners were for physical contact, and not for just a handshake, although when you do shake hands they don't let go, but for a warm hug. Humans need physical touch. Jesus recognizes that and he touches this man. At the touch of Jesus, every cell in that man's body is cleansed of leprosy. Yet, Jesus isn't defiled. He doesn't get sick or infected by the disease. Instead, his healing touch brings health and wholeness to the man.

Jesus gives two commands to the cleansed leper

He 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, as a testimony to them." (Mark 1:44)

The command to the man to show himself to the priest signifies the dual purpose of this cleansing. Because the disease of leprosy had both physical and spiritual significance, the cleansing of it also needed to involve both dimensions. Moses, in Leviticus 14, commanded that certain sacrifices be offered after a person was cleansed of leprosy, after which the priest would examine the person who was supposedly healed to make sure that the leprosy was really gone. If it was, the priest would then declare him cleansed, both physically and spiritually. Jesus knew that if he sent this man to the temple in Jerusalem to be examined it would cause tremendous consternation to the priesthood.

The last time a healing such as this had been recorded was 800 years earlier in Israel (1 Kings 5) when Elisha the prophet cleansed the non-Jewish Assyrian commander Naaman. First-century rabbis said that

leprosy was an impossible disease to heal and that only Messiah could cure leprosy. Jesus' ministry of physical healing was to be a Messianic sign for the priesthood of Israel. The priesthood, being the spiritual leadership of the nation, should have been the first to recognize that the Messiah had come, which explains why Jesus told the cleansed man to go show the priest, "to be a testimony to them."

This was not the first time Jesus quoted Messianic prophecy to communicate its fulfillment in him. When John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, Matthew records this response in his gospel account: "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM" (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus was actually quoting the Messianic vision found in Isaiah 35.

The other command Jesus gave the man was to keep the healing a secret saying, "See that you say nothing to anyone." Jesus performed miracles in the struggle against sin and evil, and to set people free from physical and spiritual bondage. They were not performed as tricks in order to obtain a following. Jesus had no interest in becoming a celebrity healer and he didn't trust faith that was based on the spectacular. He knew that whatever clamor or buzz that was created by tricks or miracle healing wouldn't last, but would die as quickly as the showmanship was performed. The apostle John had already recognized this about Jesus long before this particular event occurred:

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. (John 2:23-25)

Jesus knew that God's power would not be revealed primarily through the miraculous. Even at the end of the Lord's ministry when he was on the cross there were people who demanded a miracle from Jesus. "Come down off the cross and save yourself!" But those people saw nothing of the power of God at work. Even this man, whom Jesus had just healed from leprosy and delivered from certain death, saw Jesus as a celebrity healer rather than the Holy one of God. Mark tells us he ignored the Lord's command for secrecy:

But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere. (Mark 1:45)

Jesus was very clear and direct when he told the man to tell no one of his healing except the priest, but this guy couldn't keep his mouth shut. Furthermore, the man's disobedience actually ends up limiting and hindering Jesus' ministry. Jesus offers the man healing as a gift, the man accepts the healing, but then he disobeys Jesus, resists following Jesus' sovereign direction for his life, and instead chooses to live his new life on his own terms.

It sounds a lot like us doesn't it? We too want the benefit of the saving life of Christ at work in us, but we also want to reserve the right to live independently of his will and his way; to set our own spiritual agenda. This pattern where Jesus first miraculously changes someone's life, and then asks the person not to tell anyone, is repeated throughout the gospel of Mark. Mark tells of people who are healed but then become spiritually blinded by the miracle. And again, whenever somebody in the gospel disobeys Jesus' command of silence, the next scene usually begins by telling of the crushing crowds, the supplicants or autograph seekers, if you will who restrict Jesus' freedom of movement and make teaching practically impossible. Looking back, Jesus made it clear from the beginning that his primary calling was to teach and preach the kingdom of God.

In chapter 2, Jesus returns to Peter and Andrew's home in Capernaum, perhaps to escape the crowds, or to enjoy some rest. But he ends up with a crowd so thick that they are literally hanging from the rafters in Peter's home.

Jesus heals the paralytic

In the following five verses of chapter 2, we see the amazing determination of faith, faith in Jesus.

When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. [The word "speaking" was not meant here as preaching or proclaiming, but means "dialogue"—Jesus was having a conversation with them about the Old Testament.] **And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."** (Mark 2:1-5)

There is an impenetrable mass of people surrounding Jesus and it presents a roadblock to the paralyzed man and his four loyal friends who bring him to Jesus. Undaunted by this barrier to Jesus, they resourcefully dig through the roof to lower the man into the middle of the crowd. Imagine a faith that would produce such determination as to open a hole in a roof and lower their paralyzed friend down to Jesus, believing he would be healed. Imagine what Peter's reaction when the dust and debris started to fall as his roof was being torn off! Remember, of all of the disciples, Peter was the excitable one.

Now, we are not speaking of roofs as they are constructed today. Archeological discoveries in Capernaum show that the houses were made out of rough basalt rocks built up, without any mortar to hold them together. These pillars of rocks couldn't support much more than a thatched roof. It would have likely been a sloped roof, made up of wooden crossbeams, and overlaid with woven reeds, branches, and mud. These roofs needed to be re-built every year before the winter rains came, so it would not have been neither too difficult to dig through the roof, nor too difficult to repair.

But still, digging through the roof and dropping their friend before Jesus was nonetheless a silent, dramatic plea for help and healing. Jesus recognized that only a very determined faith in him, in his healing power, would have motivated these men to even ask for his help. The paralytic man was seeking just one touch from the Lord Jesus, and without pride he allowed himself to be let down through the roof of this house in full sight of the entire crowd, publicly exposing his helplessness. But notice that he wouldn't have been there at all except for the help and encouragement of his four friends. They are the ones who brought him to Jesus. They helped him get through both the social barrier of pride, and the physical barriers imposed by the crowd and the roof itself which kept him from Jesus.

In verse 5, Jesus gives this lame man more than he asks for in response to faith. Jesus responds with loving affection when he says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus heals him of his sin-sickness, which is the malady that we all share in common with this paralytic. Jesus not only gives him a better quality of physical life, but more importantly he gives him eternal life.

Jesus' authority to forgive sins

Jesus' life giving ministry to the paralytic brings us to the heart of this encounter. The focus now shifts

from the lame man to the Scribes, who have been listening to Jesus at Peter's house and observing it all. These scribes are outraged by his pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins.

But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk'? "But so 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, get up, pick up your pallet and go home." (Mark 2:6-11)

This is the first time in Mark's gospel account that religious leadership shows up. Also, bear in mind that during this interchange the paralytic man is lying there quietly on his mat, right in the middle of the controversy that is now taking place. Perhaps they show up in reaction to the buzz that was created when Jesus taught in the synagogue that first time in Capernaum. Mark 1:21 says, "And they were amazed at his teaching for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as the scribes." Whatever their reasons, from this point forward this "leadership" will seem to be omnipresent—opposing Jesus at every turn, confronting and challenging everything he says and how he exercises his ministry.

What is clear from this interchange is that the scribes are suspicious and skeptical. Verse 6 tells us that they were sitting down and remained silent, which is in contrast to the active demonstration of faith by the men up on the roof. With a critical spirit they ask, "Who does this man think he is? What possible redemptive authority can he have?" The Old Testament was clear: only God can forgive sin. In Isaiah 43, God himself says through his prophet Isaiah, "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25). Therefore, logically speaking, Jesus must be claiming to be God. But the scribes make a fatal error at this point, an error never to be corrected and that will send Jesus to the cross: they don't recognize Jesus for who he is—that he *does* have the right to speak for God.

As we saw last week (Discovery Paper 4794), even the demons recognize that Jesus is the Holy One of God, and here, in verse 10, in response to the scribes, Jesus identifies himself the Son of Man who has God-given authority. The title "Son of Man" is a Messianic title from Daniel 7, which speaks to its holder as having God-given authority, sovereign power, and everlasting dominion and Jesus claims that title for himself.

In Mark 2:8, we see that it's dangerous to reason in your heart while in Jesus' presence because he knows what transpires in men's hearts. Jesus calls the scribes out and proposes a test, found in verse 9, by asking the scribes, from a purely human perspective, what is easier to say: "Your sins are forgiven," which would have an unseen spiritual effect, or to say: "Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk," which would be an observable, physical phenomenon? Notice that he didn't say, "Which is easier to *do*?" Obviously, it is much easier to heal a person physically (any good doctor can do that) than to forgive sins, because only God can forgive sins. Furthermore, any religious huckster could say, "Your sins are forgiven" since nobody can prove whether it happened or not.

In essence, Jesus in saying, "Since you are questioning my spiritual authority, my ability to forgive sins, I will therefore demonstrate to you that I not only have the power to forgive sins, but I also have the power to heal physical illness as well (2:10-11). The miraculous healing verifies the forgiveness of the sins, and so Jesus heals the man on the spot.

Now, again, let's consider the paralytic. What was he thinking as he lay there on his pallet throughout that whole interaction between Jesus and the scribes? Could this man, who had been carried in on a pallet by other people, truly believe what Jesus' was saying about the forgiveness of his sin? And if so,

would he then be able to do as Jesus commanded: Get up and walk? Or, should he accept the judgment of these religious professionals and convince himself that they're right, that this guy doesn't have the authority to forgive sins and that trying to get up and walk after being a paralytic, conceivably his entire life, is hopeless? But in spite of the scribes, he does believe:

And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this." (Mark 2:12)

Whatever internal obstacles there were that may have prevented this man's healing were overcome and the contrast of this act of faith to that of the scribes, who were just sitting there, is amazing. The scribes remain seated as the man walks out in front of everybody with his mat tucked under his arm and goes home. Mark tells us that the people who were gathered there worshipped God, praised God, and thanked God for his goodness, and for his miracle-working power.

There were many faith healers in Israel at that time so healings were not thought to be unique. What probably amazed the crowd at Peter's house was Jesus' understanding of the problems of human nature. He understood the relationship between the physical, emotional, and spiritual struggles and zeroed in on the spiritual implications of physical suffering. The crowd heard Jesus tell the crippled man that his sins were forgiven, and the man, having faith in his spiritual healing, was then able to get up and walk. Jesus understood that our center of security—our identity—freedom and health in our lives—lies in relationship with God. There is a paradoxical relationship between our physical and spiritual health, and both these stories of healing address this relationship between the spiritual and the physical dimensions of life. Jesus healed the leper and then he sent him to the temple for spiritual cleansing. He forgave the sins of paralytic and then restored his ability to walk. All healing in our lives begins with our relationship to God.

Only the person who has heard Jesus say, "I am willing, I do forgive you," will be cleansed from the leprosy of sin in their life. That person will be freed from the crushing burden of a guilty existence. Only the person who has heard Jesus say, "Son" or "Daughter, your sins are forgiven so now you can get up. You can walk" can be free from all the paralyzing tension and turmoil and anxiety and insecurity of a life lived in bondage to self. Maybe it is regret from a sinful past, or a continuing pattern of unbelief and resistance to Jesus that binds us. Only Jesus can free us from self-sufficiency, self-centeredness. It is the paralysis of sin in our lives that's never been dealt with, never been forgiven, or ongoing patterns of irresponsibility, of self-absorption, that keep us from embracing Jesus and the freedom he offers.

The good news today is that Jesus is still our healer and to us, as his church body, he is our model for healing ministry. He calls us to announce forgiveness of sin; to announce the chance for reconciliation with God, resulting in spiritual healing. We need to proclaim, both in our words and ministry activity, this offer of forgiveness that can cleanse all sin. There are many people in our communities whose souls are being strangled by guilt, regret and self-absorption. *We* can speak the healing word of Jesus that tears apart the stranglehold from somebody, and allows the cleansing work of God, by his Spirit to flood into that person's life, bringing release and freedom from bondage.

When hurting people came to Jesus he didn't turn them away, but showed them God's loving compassion. He announced God's forgiveness and he drove away sin-sickness and the symptoms that go with it: hopelessness, guilt, and despair. We are called to that kind of compassionate caring in the same way that Jesus modeled God's loving care.

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Mark 1:40-2:12

Fifth Message

Doug Goins

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