

The Kingdom of God Marches On

Mark 1:35-45

Introduction: 1)

“Shackled by a heavy burden,
 Neath a load of guilt and shame;
 Then the hand of Jesus touched me,
 And now I am no longer the same.
 Since I met this blessed Savior,
 Since He cleansed and made me whole;
 I will never cease to praise Him-
 I’ll shout it while eternity rolls.
 (Chorus) He touched me, oh, He touched me,
 And oh, the joy that floods my soul!
 Something happened, and now I know,
 He touched me and made me whole.”

2) Those words, penned by Bill Gaither, in 1963, have thrilled the hearts of millions as they have reflected upon the personal touch of Jesus in their lives. Those words, apparently, were inspired by the text before us, in particular, the healing of a leper in vs. 40-45, a sure and certain sign, that God’s kingdom had come and that it was indeed marching on.

3) Jesus has just had an incredible day of teaching the Scriptures, casting out demons and healing the sick, all on the Sabbath. He has served the hurting late into the evening past sundown (v. 32). Yet, there is more to be done as the kingdom advances against the powers of darkness and the forces of evil. On what basis, by what strategy, does God continue to move ahead? Three clear aspects emerge in our text. It is interesting and instructive that sandwiched or bracketed by the miracles of healing and exorcism, we find the essential elements of prayer and preaching. We should not pass over this lightly or too quickly. Without both, the advance of the kingdom would have stopped dead in its tracks. I believe the same is true today!

I. The kingdom advances thru prayer.**1:35-37**

- Though He had been up late Jesus still rises early, “very early,” the next morning, “while it is still dark.”
- He left Peter’s home alone, going “to a desolate place,” a place of solitude and privacy. A place for restoration and fellowship with His Father is what He needs and desires.
- It is interesting to note that there are three prayers of Jesus in Mark:
 - 1) At the beginning of the Gospel and His ministry in Galilee when His ministry is being defined. (1:35)
 - 2) In the middle of the Gospel after the feeding of the five thousand (6:46). John 6:15 informs us it was at this time the people wanted “to take Him by force to make Him King.”
 - 3) Near the conclusion of the Gospel when He is in Gethsemane. (14:32-42)
 - All three prayers take place at a critical moment in the life of our Lord.
 - The setting for Jesus’ prayer in each instance is darkness and solitude.
 - All three situations recall allusions to the wilderness and the cosmic conflict of our Lord with Satan and the demonic host in their domain and territory.

Our Lord finds strength in the private solitude of prayer and intimate fellowship with His Father. What a valuable lesson and insight too many of us neglect!
- Verses 36-37 tell us that Peter and those with him sent out a “search party.” Apparently the crowds had returned for more miracles. Peter’s words almost have the sound of a rebuke, “everyone is looking for you.” In other words, “what are you doing here? This is not where you should be! You need to be with the crowds! We are building a following. Things are beginning to happen. You do not have time to be alone and pray!” Oh, how

we are so much like Peter, not understanding the ways of God and how His kingdom will come. Yes, there will be healings and exorcisms. But, there must also be prayer. And...

II. The kingdom advances thru preaching.

1:38-39

- Jesus responds to Peter as He often does: in a different and surprising manner than we expect. He will not return to those who are looking for Him. Rather he says, “let’s move on.”
 - Let’s go to the next towns.
 - I will preach there also.
 - This is why I came.
- The crowds at Peter’s house came for the miracles. Now, apparently, they want more. The call to 1) repent and 2) believe the gospel (cf. 1:15) was not on their spiritual radar.
- Like so many today they wanted a Jesus of their liking, a Jesus who would perform miracles and fit into their agenda, their plans.
- Neither the crowds nor the disciples understand why He has come into the world. But He knew!
- Jesus came to preach, herald, to proclaim the gospel of salvation, a message that is by Him and about Him. Indeed, He is the gospel!
- This is how the kingdom advanced in the 1st century, how it has advanced throughout history, and how it will advance today. Prayer and preaching is a one-two punch that cannot be defeated.
- God had only one Son and He made Him a preacher. No pastor is worthy of the name who does not preach the Word. No church will prosper spiritually without the preaching of the Word. No Christian will grow and mature in Christlikeness without the Word.

John Stott said, “Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God.” (*Two Worlds*, 15). Luther would add, “Let us consider it certain and conclusively established that the soul can do without all things except the Word of God, and that where this is not there is no help for the soul in anything else whatever. (*Three Treatises*, 23).

- Jesus went throughout all Galilee, preaching the gospel and casting out demons. He did this out of a life of prayer. This is how the kingdom marches on anywhere, anyplace and anytime.

Transition: The kingdom advances thru prayer and preaching.

III. The kingdom advances thru cleansing.

1:40-45

- As he was traveling and ministering Jesus is met by a leper, an outcast, a man deemed by the Law unclean and by the people as cursed by God. We can hardly imagine a similar scenario today. Even one with AIDS fares far better than the leper of the 1st century.
- This encounter is startling, provocative, even offensive. This is clearly what the reaction would have been in that day. Minimally a leper was to stay at least 50 paces from others who did not have the disease. That he came near to Jesus, so close Jesus could touch him, was to do the unthinkable.
- Leprosy was a widely known disease in the ancient world. There was widespread superstition and fear about it. The word itself covered a number of skin diseases (including what we today call “Hansen’s Disease”), each of which was difficult to diagnose and heal. Scribes catalogues as many as 22 skin diseases defined as leprosy. Leviticus 13-14 discussed at length the disease and how it was to be dealt with. It was usually regarded as an evidence of divine punishment. The cure could only come from the Lord. No one in the Bible healed a leper by His touch other than Jesus.

- The person with the disease was mocked and shunned. It was the closest thing to a “living death,” “a dead man walking.” The leper had to wear torn clothes, leave his hair unkempt, cover his face and cry out “unclean, unclean.” He was forced to live in isolation from the community and normal society. Josephus said they were “in no way differing from a corpse” (*Ant.* 3.264). Other illnesses could be healed, but leprosy had to be both healed and cleansed.
- No wonder leprosy is such a descriptive picture of sin. Warren Wiersbe notes, “When you read the “tests” for leprosy in Leviticus 13, you can see how the disease is a picture of sin. Like sin, leprosy is deeper than the skin (v. 3); it spreads (vv. 5-8); it defiles and isolates (vv. 44-46); and renders things fit only for the fire (vv. 47-59). Anyone who has ever trusted the Savior is spiritually in worse shape than this man was physically” (p. 19).
- All of this makes it remarkable that the leper came to Jesus. He violated every convention and custom of society in that day. He was desperate and he believed only Jesus could heal him and make him clean.
- Note the actions of the leper: 1) he came; 2) he implored (plead, pleaded, asked earnestly); 3) he knelt; 4) he spoke: if you will, you can make me clean. Wow! He knew Jesus was able! The issue is not could He, but would He. This man comes to Jesus with great courage, great humility and great faith, the same way we, as sin sick sinners, must come to Him. He came believing in the only one who could change his life and make him whole.
- Note the response of Jesus: 1) He was moved with pity (great compassion); 2) He stretched out His hand; 3) He touched him!; 4) He spoke: “I will, be clean.”

- Experiencing the loving touch of the Savior's hand and hearing precious words of compassion and hope we are not surprised at what we read in v. 42, "immediately, the leprosy left him, and he was made clean." Surprisingly and scandalously Jesus, in compassion not contempt, makes the unclean clean! Rather than turning away from the man he turns to him and touches him, removing his curse, taking away his shame and removing his defilement. As the Suffering Servant of Is 53:4, He takes on Himself the infirmities of this man, cleanses him, and makes Him whole!
- The touch of Jesus speaks more loudly than any words ever could. And His words, they must have thrilled this man's soul: "I will." Unlike any ordinary man, the Lord Jesus is not polluted by the leper's disease when He touches him. Instead, the leper is cleansed and he is healed by the gracious touch and contagious holiness of the Son of God.
- Verses 43-44 are both unsurprising and surprising. It is not surprising that Jesus sends the man to a local priest commanding him to follow the biblical ritual for cleansing as laid out in Leviticus 14. No surprise here. Interestingly, it is estimated that there were 20,000 priests in Palestine in the 1st century.
- What is surprising is the stern charge and quick exit Jesus demands of the cleansed leper. He sends him packing with a command to keep his mouth shut. Jesus does not want persons who seek miracles. He wants followers who seek Him! People are always tempted by the sensational. Jesus desires followers who long for Truth and Him. He does not want people to come to Him to get what they want. He wants people to come to Him to get Him!

- Verse 45 reveals the cleansed leper's disobedient response and the negative fallout that resulted. We can understand His enthusiasm. We cannot, however, justify his disregard of our Lord's clear command.
 - He went and talked freely about what Jesus had done. He talked of it everywhere.
 - In fact, he spread the news. *The Message*: “spreading the news all over town.”
 - This forced a restriction and limitation on Jesus' preaching ministry as He “could no longer openly enter a town.”
 - In fact, He was again led to stay “in a desolate place” (cf. v. 35), this time not of His own choosing.
 - Still, “people were coming to Him from everywhere.”

As Mark will say of Him in 7:24, so it is already true now, “He could not be hidden.”

Ironically Jesus and the leper have traded places. The leper is now on the inside with family and friends. Jesus, in contrast, is on the outside in a lonely and desolate place.

This picture of substitution, we will come to understand, is the heart of the gospel. It is why Jesus came. He will take on Himself our sin, our sorrow, our shame. In return He gives us His forgiveness, His holiness, His righteousness, praise the Lord! What an exchange!

Conclusion: The rabbis said that it was as difficult to heal the leper as it was to raise the dead. Both are impossible for man. Neither is a problem for God's Son. He cleanses the defiled and raises the dead by a simple touch or a simple word. He truly touches lives and makes them whole. He did that for me. Has He done that for you?