

“Jesus Healed Many”

The Sixth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 1:29-45; Numbers 12:1-15

The kingdom of God has invaded the most unlikely of places—a small fishing village named Capernaum on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. This is where the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth began. Soon after he began to preach, Jesus called a number of disciples who dropped everything to follow him. But it was a confrontation with a demon possessed man in the synagogue in Capernaum in which Jesus’ true identity is first publically revealed. When this demon-possessed man heard Jesus preaching the good news of the kingdom, the demon cried out, “*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!*” Whenever the kingdom of God draws near, conflict with the dominion of Satan is inevitable. Demons flee in terror when commanded by Jesus. But that is not all the presence of the kingdom brings about. Sick people are healed and Jesus continues his messianic ministry of fishing for men and women who are summoned to repent of their sins and believe the gospel.

This morning, we continue our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are in the opening chapter of Mark’s Gospel which describes the initial phases of Jesus ministry in the region around the Sea of Galilee. As we have seen, upon hearing of John the Baptist’s arrest by King Herod, Jesus began his public ministry—preaching that God’s appointed hour had come and that the kingdom of heaven was near. Jesus summoned all those who heard him to repent of their sins and believe the good news he was preaching. Jesus also began calling disciples to follow him—this includes the four fishermen who most likely lived in Capernaum, Simon (Peter), Andrew, James and John. When Jesus called these men—who were going about their business, trying to earn a living and provide for their families—they immediately follow their new master. Jesus is, in effect, calling them forth in a new Exodus to form a new Israel in which they will function much like the twelve sons of Jacob (the head of the twelve tribes of Israel). Jesus told these four men that while they had been fishers of fish, they would soon become fishers of men.

As we saw last Sunday when we covered verses 21-28 of Mark 1, Jesus appeared in the local synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach the assembled congregation. The people who witnessed Jesus in the synagogue that morning were absolutely astonished by what they saw and heard. Jesus did not have Rabbinic credentials and yet he spoke with great authority, completely unlike the scribes and Pharisees with whom the people of Capernaum had become used to hearing. No doubt, Jesus preached the same message in the synagogue that Mark has already described—he told them that the hour is at hand and that kingdom of God has drawn near. We get the sense from Mark’s report of what happened (probably recounted to Mark by Peter) that Jesus preached from the Torah in such a way that people thought Jesus was applying the words of Scripture to himself. No one had ever seen or heard anything like it. Everyone present that Sabbath was astonished. This man was called by God. Perhaps he was even a prophet. Maybe Jesus is the one John the Baptist said would come after him.

It was another person present that morning who revealed Jesus’ true identity to the assembled congregation. While Jesus was preaching about the kingdom, a demon-possessed man cried out that Jesus was the Holy One of God who had come to bring about the day of judgment. But it was how Jesus responded to this demon-possessed man which shocked everyone. “*Be quiet!*” said Jesus sternly. “*Come out of him!*” When Jesus spoke these words, we read that “*the evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.*” Who was this who not only taught with great authority, but who

exercised such power that even demons were subject to him? As Mark puts it in verse 27, “*the people were all so amazed that they asked each other, ‘What is this?’ A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.*” Mark also tells us that “*news about [Jesus] spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*” In fact, in the balance of the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, we will hear the story of how and why this news about Jesus spread so quickly.

It was that same Sabbath afternoon that Jesus’ disciples learn that their new master’s authority is not only seen in his teaching and in his ability to cast out evil spirits at a word, his authority over all things is also seen in his ability to heal the sick.

Mark’s account is staccato like-vivid and “nothing but the facts.” The first incident Mark recounts—the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law—surely was recounted to Mark by Peter himself. This account contains the kind of details that people who were actually there would mention when retelling the story. This kind of thing surely reinforces the idea that the gospels are based upon eyewitness recollection and are not mythological.¹ In any case, we read in verse 29 that “*as soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew.*” The indication is that Simon (Peter) and Andrew lived close to the synagogue, so that Jesus and his new disciples went to Peter and Andrew’s home to rest and then to eat the afternoon meal—typical Sabbath practice for most Jews. This may well have been the place where Jesus stayed while he was in the area.

That Peter was married is evident by what follows. “*Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her.*” If Peter was the first pope, then he also had a wife. It also means that when Jesus calls Peter to follow him, it means leaving his family behind and finding a means to care for them in his absence. We learn from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that Peter traveled with his wife when he visited the Corinthian church some twenty years later (1 Corinthians 9:5). Peter’s mother-in-law was probably part of a group of women who lived in the home and who would have helped serve the special meal (prepared the day before) for the Rabbi, who was their invited guest. But she was too ill to help and was very likely uncharacteristically absent from the hustle and bustle going on in the home. Something clearly wasn’t right if Peter’s mother-in-law was too sick to be involved in the Sabbath observance.

In the ancient world, a fever was regarded not as a symptom of an illness, but as an illness itself.² And so we can imagine Jesus and his disciples arriving for the Sabbath rest before the late afternoon meal and Peter’s mother-in-law was conspicuously absent. And so the disciples tell Jesus about her situation and that she is too sick to help (in the Gospel of Luke, the Greek text says she has a “high fever”—Luke, who was probably a doctor, took special notice of this). The disciples are understandably quite worried about her and bring this to Jesus’ attention. Mark simply reports that Jesus “*went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.*” At his touch the fever immediately left this woman and she felt so much better that she was soon able to show her gratitude for what Jesus had done by ministering to Jesus and helping serve the meal. As compassion is extended to her by Jesus, she, in turn, is compassionate to Jesus. Jesus not only has authority to teach and cast out demons, he also has authority over sickness as well. Who is this man?

The healing of Peter’s mother-in-law is the first of many miracles recorded in Mark’s gospel. These

¹ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 81.

² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 77.

miracles can be divided into four main classes— miracles of healing, exorcisms, the raising of the dead, and miracles demonstrating Jesus’ authority over nature. That miracles are a prominent theme in Mark can be seen from the fact that forty-seven percent of the verses in the first ten chapters of Mark deal with miracles either directly or indirectly.³ These miracles are a demonstration of both Jesus’ power as the Son of God and are signs of the presence of the kingdom of God. Our Lord’s miracles prove a number of important things affirmed by Jesus in his preaching. These miracles provide a means of divine authentication that what Jesus is preaching is true, even though his preaching contains things that are difficult to understand and which goes against sinful human expectation.

Our Lord’s miracles also demonstrate that he is greater than John the Baptist and that Jesus is certainly more powerful than Satan. In fact, many theologians question whether Satan can actually perform miracles. Paul speaks of counterfeit Satanic signs and wonders in 2 Thessalonians 2:9. Some believe that Satan is a master deceiver and trickster (a magician *par excellence*) who can deceive people through trickery and suggestion, but who cannot in any sense control the natural order. But whatever we conclude about this, we should not think of Satan’s power as in any sense equal to that of Jesus, or that there is ever any doubt as to the outcome of the struggle between the kingdom of God and the dominion of Satan. Despite his ferocity and deceitfulness, Satan is a creature and Jesus has already defeated him by not giving in to Satan when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Furthermore, Jesus is the Son of God, now indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit. Whatever Satan can or cannot do, he is no match for Jesus.

Clearly, then, the miracles Mark records do demonstrate that Jesus is indeed the Holy One sent from God—the demon recognized him as such and the fact that the demon immediately obeyed Christ’s command is proof of this. Such miracles are therefore the “sign” that the kingdom of God is at hand in the person of Jesus. But there are other things to consider about these miracles as well. They fulfill a number of Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah and they demonstrate that as the kingdom of God advances, Satan is being bound by the strong man—the very point made by Jesus in Matthew 12:29. Something which is easy to overlook, but yet essential in understanding the meaning and purpose of these miracles is the fact in many case that they visibly demonstrate Jesus compassion and God’s pity on his suffering people.⁴ In this sense, the miracles point ahead to the resurrection at the end of the age when all diseases are cured and when everyone is made whole when the curse is removed.

And yet, as powerful and compelling as these miracles are, by themselves they do not compel faith on the part of unbelievers. As Mark will tell us the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and even Capernaum, do not repent and believe when Jesus performs a number of miracles in these cities. Even Jesus’ own disciples misunderstand these miracles as, for example, in Mark 6:52, when the disciples failed to understand the meaning of the miracle of the loaves and are terrified when Jesus crosses the sea and enters their boat. Since the ultimate purpose of these miracles is to reveal Christ’s glory, therefore, they can only truly be understood correctly when seen through the eyes of faith. While unbelievers may be amazed and even silenced by them, the miracle by itself does not a turn an unbeliever into a believer. The kinds of miracles Jesus performs are not designed to “wow” people just for the sake of showing them how powerful he is. Jesus’ miracles are intended to show people that the gospel is true.

Therefore, when Jesus drives out a demon, this is proof that his kingdom is greater than Satan’s. When

³ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 82.

⁴ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 83.

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, he's not trying to amaze the citizens of Capernaum, he is demonstrating God's mercy toward a sick woman. Indeed throughout the gospels we see that while Jesus healed all manner of sickness and disease, the ones that are specifically mentioned are quite significant. When Jesus heals a leper, this means that Jesus can remove the uncleanness of sin and its corruption. When Jesus gives sight to the blind, he is showing us those who believe him now see things from God's perspective—Jesus gives spiritual eyesight through faith. When Jesus restores hearing to the deaf, he is demonstrating that he gives his people the ability not just to hear God's word, but understand its meaning. When Jesus enables the lame to walk, he is showing us that we must follow him. In other words, the miracles we see in the gospels are not there to impress us. Rather, they are signs and pictures to those who believe that God's promises are true and that Jesus can deliver on the things that he has promised. In this sense, then, the miracles prove Christianity to be true and damn those who reject Jesus. They are signs of God's blessing toward his people, and signs of curse to those who refuse to believe.

Word about things has a way of spreading quickly through small towns. This was no doubt the case in Capernaum when Jesus drove out the demon and healed Peter's mother-in-law.

According to verses 32-34, word about what happened that Sabbath in the synagogue and at Peter and Andrew's house spread throughout the entire community. Mark informs us *"that evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was."* This report also has an eyewitness sound to it, especially given the fact that the source (probably Peter) recalled that the whole town showed up outside his house. The time frame is important as well, since people waited for sundown, when the Sabbath was over, before coming to Peter and Andrew's home to seek healing. The picture is one in which there is a large and growing crowd outside the door of the home, all desperately seeking help from Jesus.

We should also take note of the fact that Mark clearly distinguishes between sickness and demon possession. The ancients did not possess the vast medical knowledge that we do and misinterpreted a number illnesses resulting in very poor methods of treatment, but perhaps better than we can today, they could tell the difference between illness and the work of Satan. In any case, as people lined up outside Peter's house, we learn that Jesus healed them one after the other as they came to the door. This is a clear indication of Jesus' tender compassion upon all those were suffering. That Jesus also cast out demons should come as no surprise, given the encounter with the demon-possessed man earlier that day. This time Jesus commanded the demons to remain quiet about him—a reference to the fact that Jesus is seeking to prevent people from misunderstanding the nature and character of his mission.⁵

The sad fact is that people have come to Jesus not because they have heard him preach and are desiring to repent of their sins and believe the good news he has been proclaiming. The people come because Jesus is a miracle worker and they seek relief from pain and suffering. In his compassion, Jesus heals them and frees them from Satanic oppression, but this is not why he has come. The demon knew who Jesus was, the Holy One of God, in whom the kingdom of God draws near. The suffering people see Jesus as the ultimate HMO. It is all quite tragic—not only the extent of human suffering found in any community and the desperation of people needing help, but let us not miss the fact that even though Jesus is compassionate and heals them, human sin has blinded these people to Jesus' true identity and to the

⁵ See the discussion of the so-called "Messianic Secret" in France, [The Gospel of Mark](#), 31-32.

nature of his mission.⁶ They are not interested in Jesus' preaching, they are sick and desperate.

And so because of this sad fact, Jesus determines to withdraw from the area. But before he makes his decision, the true Israel returns to the wilderness to pray.

Mark tells us in verse 35, that *"very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."* Before anyone had yet awakened, Jesus went out to a "wilderness place"—which the NIV correctly translates as a place of solitude. Jesus had just come from forty days in the wilderness where angels ministered to him and where he was totally dependant upon his Father. The scene is one in which the clamor of the crowds and the way in which they have misunderstood his messianic mission was both a temptation to Jesus—the people would have been willing to follow Jesus anyplace and do as bidding, even though they totally misunderstood what he was doing—and a potential disruption to his overall mission. Thus Jesus retreats to the wilderness. But why the wilderness? Is Jesus a nature lover? The reason Jesus goes out into the wilderness is to pray. Three times Mark will tell us that Jesus prays (here, when Jesus feeds the 5000 in Mark 6:46, and in Gethsemane as recounted in Mark 14:32-42), all three of these are critical moments in our Lord's ministry. In each case, Jesus is alone, in a solitary place, no doubt praying for strength to fulfill his father's will and undergo the judgment of God as his mission inevitably will take him to Jerusalem.⁷

Jesus' unexpected absence from Peter's house was alarming. Mark tells us that *"Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.'"* Like the pitiful people in Capernaum, the disciples likewise misunderstand the purpose of Jesus' ministry. They want Jesus to go back the city and minister to the crowds, which had gathered at their house. Jesus, however, sees his mission quite differently. He did not come to serve as an emergency room for the citizens of Capernaum, but he came to preach the gospel because in his person, the kingdom of God draws near. His mission is to summon men and women to repent of their sins and believe the gospel. And although Jesus frequently demonstrates compassion upon the suffering, even his own disciples have missed the point. And so Mark tells us in verse 39 that Jesus *"traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons."* The time has come to preach the good news of the kingdom in new places.

Upon making the decision to leave Capernaum so as to preach to a wider audience, Mark now includes the account of Jesus healing a man with leprosy. This incident is important because it not only shows Jesus' power to heal a horrible disease, which, in first-century condemned the victim to a life of suffering and slow death, but in this miracle we also see Jesus' attitude toward ritual purity and the ceremonial law as taught in the Old Testament.

Given the placement of this story here, we can assume that this occurred shortly after Jesus left Capernaum when this poor man approached him. The Greek word which is translated here as leprosy could refer to any number of serious skin diseases, including leprosy. Leprosy not only ate away digits (toes and fingers) and a person's face, according to Leviticus 13:45-46, leprosy rendered someone ceremonially unclean. *"The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair*

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 80.

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 81-82.

be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp." Jews were also very familiar with the story in Numbers 12:1-15 (our Old Testament lesson this morning) in which God's judgment came upon Moses and Aaron's sister Miriam, when she was stricken with leprosy for one week and forced to remain outside the camp. The disease was not only serious, and was in many instances a slow death sentence, it rendered someone a complete and total outcast.

As Mark recounts these events in verse 40, "*A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'if you are willing, you can make me clean.'*" Somehow or another, this man had seen Jesus heal others or had heard about it. The man comes boldly to Jesus and asks Jesus to heal him. Not only did this poor man believe Jesus could heal him, he is also asking Jesus to pronounce him ritually clean, something only a priest could do. This would allow the man to regain something of his life. Mark tells us that Jesus was very deeply moved by the man's plight and takes immediate action. "*Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.*" Not only does Jesus heal the man with a mere touch—that he was instantly healed was apparent to everyone present—but more importantly, Jesus touches a man whom the ceremonial law regarded as unclean. This was an unheard of act of compassion on Jesus' part—to touch someone from whom Jesus may have caught a potential fatal disease and to do so in apparent violation of the ceremonial law. But Jesus places his own love and compassion for this suffering man above the specific demands of the ceremonial law. Jesus is not only sovereign over all sickness and disease and can heal with but a touch, when the demands of the law and Jesus love and compassion for the suffering come into conflict, Jesus places love above the law because he is the one who came to fulfill the law.⁸ Only God incarnate would have the right and the authority to do this.

What comes next in verses 43-44 is also rather remarkable. "*Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.'*" The Greek text is rather strong. Jesus angrily instructed the man not to tell anyone and to go and show himself to the priests, who would then formally declare the man clean. This is in accord with the ceremonial law. That Jesus is angry here has troubled the commentators/translators who struggle to explain away our Lord's anger. But Jesus is not angry as sinful humans get angry. Jesus is angry with the consequences of sin which led to this poor man (and a divine image bearer) suffering so horribly.⁹ Jesus' anger may also stem from the fact the man completely disobeyed Jesus' instructions. According to verse 45, "*instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.*" The kingdom of God was drawing near, and sadly the people of Israel did not understand what was going on.

The man with leprosy is the perfect illustration of how our sin blinds us to the truth about our circumstances. This man truly believed that Jesus could heal him and he boldly approached Jesus asking for Jesus' help. Whether the man had what we call saving faith is not made clear. Because Jesus was compassionate on those who suffer, he healed the man. But leprosy was not the man's greatest problem. His greatest problem was that he was a sinner and that he stood guilty before God. When Jesus heals him and removed from his body the ravages of this disease, the man should have realized that Jesus also had

⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 87.

⁹ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 92.

the authority to forgive him of his sins. But instead of repenting and believing the content of Jesus' preaching, this man's joy got the better of him and he disobeyed Jesus and told everyone that Jesus had healed him, making it that much more difficult for Jesus to preach the gospel. This poor man was thankful to be healed, but apparently missed the whole point. He is a sinner in need of the salvation Jesus brings.

This miracle tells us that Jesus is compassionate on the suffering and that his authority is such that he can heal even the most heinous of diseases. But also tells us that Jesus can take away the cause of all human sickness and suffering, the guilt of sin. He who can cure leprosy can also forgive us of our sins. The removal of the ravages of the disease is a graphic picture to us that Jesus can also remove the cause of all human disease and suffering, the guilt of our sins. Beloved, let us not make the same mistake the leper did. If Jesus can heal leprosy with but a touch, then when he promises us he will forgive us of our sins if we repent and believe, we know that Jesus can do what he has promised. Leprosy was a horrible disease. Jesus cured it. The reality is that we are all spiritual lepers of a sort. We all committed horrible sins which ravage us. And Jesus can forgive them—ever last one of them. He can make us clean. Jesus healed many. So we know he is willing. The question is are we willing to repent of our sins and believe the gospel?