

Mark 1:40-2:12

Healing a leper and healing a paralytic... If you're like me, then when you read these stories, it seems like, Wow! This Jesus guy is pretty powerful and interesting! He can heal all kinds of people. He just has to will it and, BAM! People are healed.

But an attitude that also may arise is "So what?" Is Mark just recounting all of the great things Jesus did to show how great he was? I mean, I'm a Christian, I believe Jesus was God and everything. But why does it seem like Mark is just including these long list of miracle accounts? How is it connected and why does it matter?

There are a number of different ways to try and apply the passage. Particularly with verses 2:1-12, one reaction to this passage is a sentimental reflection on the value of friends. If the paralytic on the mat would not have had his friends, he would not have been healed. Another way of understanding this set of passages is framed in the question above. These accounts simply add to the fact that Jesus was a pretty awesome guy! But if we approach the text from this vantage point, we will sorely miss the point of the passage, and not be nourished by the Word of God.

These are not stories with a moral message like Aesop's Fables. Rather, these accounts go to further clarify Jesus message stated in verses 14&15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" How does the cleansing of a leper and healing of a paralytic demonstrate that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand?

The point is simple: The power of the Gospel breaks down distinctions between clean and unclean, making a new man, and possesses the power to forgive sin!

Most, if not all of you here today are Gentiles, so the clean unclean distinction may not be as clear to you as it would be to a Jew. Jesus' audience would have known these restrictions full well. Which is why the account of healing the leper is so astonishing. As a quick review of the relationship between clean and unclean, we can quickly turn to Haggai 2:12-14.

Haggai (under the command of God) has the following dialogue with the people, *"If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy?" The priests answered and said 'No.'* Then Haggai said, *'If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?' The priests answered and said, 'It does become unclean.'* Then Haggai answered and said, *"So is it with this people, and with this nation before me, declares the Lord, and so with every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean."*

The primary thrust of Haggai's argument is that the people of God are defiled and unclean in heart. But the principle that Haggai argues from is based on the cleansing regulations. Contact with the unclean defiles the clean.

Leviticus 13 verses 45 and 46 describe how the unclean must be placed outside of the city. Their uncleanliness would contaminate the clean members of the community. Therefore, in order to be accepted back into the community, God instituted cleaning rituals for lepers.

In these rituals (which can be found in Leviticus 14), the leper is commanded to shave all of his hair, wash his clothes, and make sacrifices. On the eighth day of his cleansing, the leper sacrifices a guilt offering and the priest puts blood on the lobe of the right ear, the right thumb, and the right big toe. In order to be clean, the blood of the sacrifice had to cover the unclean man and a sacrifice had to be made so that, the man is pronounced clean and welcomed into the people of God. What is the point of this process? The leper becomes a new man, he has moved from unclean to clean.

What is interesting about this process is that it is similar to the rituals that consecrated the priests. Leviticus 8 describes that the priests must make similar sacrifices and cleanse their clothes and also with the marking of blood on the ear, finger, and toe. We may say then that the cleansing of a leper would reinstitute him as part of the royal priesthood of Israel.

This idea of clean and unclean then is very important to how the Israelites function. If someone is unclean, they are cast outside of the people of God. This, as a quick aside, is an important reason to read even the “boring” parts of the Old Testament! They help us understand the Gospel, and the New Testament even better.

In verse 40, the leper recognizes his need for cleansing and knows that Jesus can heal him. What Jesus does next is astonishing. Jesus stretches out his hand, and cleanses the leper! The clean man touches the unclean, which means that the clean man would be defiled correct? Moses, Haggai and all the other prophets would say yes, Jesus is now unclean.

But what is shocking is that Jesus doesn't become unclean! And not only does Jesus not become unclean, he cleanses the Leper.

This is the power of the Gospel! In the Old Covenant, Satan had the power to make the clean unclean. But as Mark structures his story, we see that Satan has been defeated. Jesus triumphs over him in the wilderness, and he casts out the demons that are oppressing the people. The power of Satan to make the world unclean has been overcome!

This does not mean that the Law is abolished. Jesus is explicit throughout the Gospels that he did NOT come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. This is seen in Jesus' command for the man to present himself to the priests so they can see he was healed. But also to testify to them.

Testify to them about what though? The Scriptures are saying that the man is to testify that Jesus is in fact coming to fulfill the Law. Jesus is showing the people that the One greater than Moses is here. The one who is a better mediator for the people of God. Through Christ, people are cleansed and made new.

However, much like us, the leper does not fully understand the meaning behind what Jesus has done. He simply views the healing of his leprosy as an end in itself. In his excitement in his healing, he disobeys Jesus' command to not spread the word.

Upon first glance, it can be difficult to understand Jesus' motivation for keeping his ministry quiet. But the key to helping us understand his command is found in verse 38, *"Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."*

The reason that Jesus came was not to heal the sick, though, Jesus certainly was filled with pity for this man and his physical condition. But the purpose for his coming was to preach the Gospel. The crowds were more interested in Jesus as a miracle workers and healer than as the Son of God bringing in the kingdom.

We cannot be so quick as to chastise this man and the crowds however, for how often do we miss the point of the Gospel? We take the blessings of God (like the healing) and pervert them and stunt the growth of the kingdom. When you view the Church as a place to simply develop friendships you miss the point of the Gospel. If you view your membership in the church, or your identification with the purity of her teaching selfishly, you subvert the Gospel.

Your actions cannot ultimately prevent the growth of the Gospel, for clearly this man did not stop the Gospel from spreading. But he hindered Jesus in his ministry, and most importantly, missed the point of the Gospel...

Which is why the story of the paralytic fits so well in the flow of Mark's story. Jesus' will clarify the meaning of his miracles.

Verse 45 tells us that Jesus went out to the wilderness to escape the crowds that came to him in the cities. As mentioned earlier, this is because Jesus primary function is to preach. And this is precisely what he is doing at the beginning of this narrative.

As Peter said last week, the preaching of the Gospel is absolutely essential to the ministry of the Gospel. That is why we are to gather together in worship, to hear the Word preached. The preached Word then changes us and changes what we do. This means we are active in working for social change (like the healings) because of the call of the Gospel.

Working for social change and advance is a good thing. However, it is important to remember you cannot become so focused on social change that you miss the true power of the Gospel in the preached word. You cannot have the preached Word without deeds that follow. The Gospel teaches we serve the needy, but we do so understanding the primacy of the preaching of the Word.

So the four men then did not do anything wrong in bringing the man to be healed by Jesus. We are actually commanded to bring any sick to the elders so that they can be prayed for according to James 5. But Jesus response to their appeal for help is counter-intuitive and orients proper mercy ministry.

Seeing their faith, Jesus responds, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

To the scribes the question of the paralytic and his friends and Jesus response did not make sense. It seems so excessive! It's like being at a store when you don't have exact change and you see if you can use a penny or two from the person behind you, but in response they say, "I'll pay you're entire bill." While this analogy helps us understand the uniqueness of Jesus answer, we would have to say that the price was an infinite amount that no one but God could pay! What Jesus is saying is that he could do something far beyond healing this man's legs.

Jesus points out to those in attendance the content of his message is more powerful and important than the signs or miracles. Jesus is clarifying what the healings and exorcisms have been pointing to—His authority on Earth to redeem people's sinful hearts and make them new (like the leper)!

In this specific context it is not entirely clear how Jesus pronouncement of pardon applies to the paralytic. While there are cases where illness is brought upon an individual for his sin, it would not seem to be consistent with the tone of this passage and Biblical testimony on sickness for Jesus to be attributing his illness to specific sin. Much more likely, the man's illness is tied to original sin and the problem that infects the fallen world. The point of Jesus' proclamation of forgiveness is not based in the mans condition; it is based in the power that Christ has as the Son of God. So whether you find yourself in an uncomfortable position because of blatant sin, or are simply suffering as a result of the fall (illness, death, being sinned against), Christ will forgive our sin and cleanse our hearts as we look to him in faith.

But this is precisely why the scribes rejected his claim. For the only one that could forgive sins was God. If anyone but Jesus would have made this claim, the scribes would have been correct! But Jesus understood that people were asking this question so he responded, *"Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you rise, pick up your bed and go home."*

Jesus is providing an explanation not only for this miracle, but for what his other miracles are pointing to, namely, his authority as the Son of God. Jesus was teaching the crowds that to only see the physical healing is to misunderstand Jesus' ministry. That is why Jesus asks which is easier.

For a man to heal the way Jesus was, for Jesus to touch the unclean man and make him clean, for Jesus to be casting out demons, and overcoming Satan, his ministry could not have been from the authority of man. So Jesus is trying to get the crowds to understand that Jesus was not a miracle worker. He was the Son of God, bringing about the kingdom of God and overcoming the power of Satan.

Jesus therefore constructed an irrefutable argument. If Jesus healed this man, then according to the scribes own question, Jesus DID have the authority to forgive sins. When Jesus tells the man to get up and walk home, his authority to forgive sin is confirmed. This is one of the more straightforward claims in Mark of Jesus divine responsibility and identity. Jesus is trying to communicate what the coming of the kingdom means. Not JUST healings (that were prophesied in the OT), but the reason that the Son of Man is to deliver the world from her sin and make her new.

And this is where we can derive an important lesson from the friends who brought the paralytic before Jesus. Without these men, the paralytic would not have received forgiveness or healing, but because of their faith, he was healed. As such, we can call them a great example of what friendship is all about.

They brought their friend to Jesus, believing that he was sufficient to heal their friend. In your relationships, do you point your friends and family to Christ? Do you have faith that it is Jesus alone that can heal the ailments of their hearts?

We ought to follow the example of the paralytic's friends who do not seek notoriety or try to solve his problem outside of Christ. Instead, they selflessly bring their friend to the feet of Christ.

The picture of the leper and paralytic is also something that we can identify with. The leper is cut off from the people of God, unclean before Him. Being Gentiles, all of us were unclean! We were cut off from the people of God! But Jesus broke down this barrier and through his Spirit working in our heart; our defiled flesh becomes the dwelling place of Christ! Likewise, the paralytic is physically crippled as a result of sin (through Adam), and we are spiritually crippled by sin. Apart from the forgiveness of Christ, the man could not walk and follow Jesus. Similarly, apart from the pardon of Jesus Christ, we are unable to walk after him.

And what is this pardon granted upon? Faith, and faith alone. Similarly, we are to believe in the power of the Gospel, and the grace of God renews our hearts, and gives us strength to stand and walk after him. Before the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, we are unable to follow Christ. But after the Spirit gives us strength, we walk in gratitude with our Savior.

The people were amazed at what this meant and exclaimed, "*We never saw anything like this!*" They realized something incredible had begun, but they did not even understand the fullness of what it would mean. Today, you live understanding that Christ has come not only to forgive the paralytic, but also to forgive you when you accept him by faith.

Christ has conquered Satan, and instituted a new age in redemptive history. No longer does Satan have the power to defile the clean, now the things previously unclean, have been made clean in Christ. In the forgiveness of Christ, there is power to make the unclean, clean. The created order is being restored in Christ, this is why in the New Testament clean and unclean foods do not apply. For through the forgiveness of Christ, in Christ, all things we touch become holy.

So to conclude with what was said at the outset, this passage indicates the power of the Gospel to cleanse the unclean, and to forgive the sinful. So what is our response?

Repent and believe in the Gospel, to be cleansed from the uncleanness of sin to the righteousness of Christ, forgiven of your sin, so that you can stand as a new man, and follow Christ into the Kingdom.