

Healing, praying and preaching

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[0 : 0 0] Well, turn with me to the passage that we read, the second of the passages that we read in Mark's Gospel and chapter 1. We want to think for a brief time on the verses that we read there from verse 29 through to verse 39. What do you do? I wonder how many times you've been asked that question.

Maybe you've posed the question. Sometimes when we meet people we haven't met before in whatever setting and we're making polite conversation and we're maybe not very sure what to say or what to ask, that's one of the standard questions that we can pose or that is posed to us. So what do you do?

And the question almost invariably is an inquiry as to our job or our profession. And for many who both ask and respond to the question, the answer given provides a measure of who we are, indeed what we are worth, how clever we are, how successful, how interesting, how desirable. Often all of these questions are unspoken, but people are coming to conclusions on the basis of how an answer is given to the question, so what do you do? As Christians we ought to consciously resist the pressure to place a value on ourselves or others on the flimsy foundation of the nature of our paid employment or job title. And that becomes, it's always important. I think maybe in the days that we're living in Aberdeen we're reminded, I hope we're reminded of that, that the measure of a man or a woman, the value of a person, it cannot be measured on the basis of the job that they have or the income that they receive. That said, and though we do need to be careful on this front, that said, what we do, especially when we consider more broadly what we do, not only the job that we have, but what we do in life, how we occupy our days and our times, that can be a useful pointer to who we are and what we consider important and valuable. And as Jesus began his public ministry, as recorded for us by Mark, we're given a taste of what he does. And what he does tells us a great deal about who he is and what is important to him. I don't know if Jesus was ever asked that question that we began with in polite conversation. So, what do you do? If he had ever been asked the question, or if he was asked the question, I wonder if he might have answered with a question that laid bare the superficiality of the inquiry. But he could have responded along these lines. Well, I do a bit of healing, a bit of praying, a bit of preaching. That would have been an accurate answer to the question, what do you do?

And it is to these three activities that I want us to turn our attention as we consider what Mark records about them in this passage. Jesus healing, Jesus praying, and Jesus preaching. We can think about these three activities under these headings. First of all, a tender touch. Jesus heals. In this case, particularly focusing on Peter, Simon Peter's mother-in-law. A tender touch. But also an early start, as we were already talking about with the children. Jesus praying. But then also a priority task, and that is Jesus preaching, or in any case indicating the place that preaching occupies in his life and ministry. First of all then, a tender touch. Jesus healing. We began our reading from verse 29.

That's in the middle of the day, as it were. Jesus and the disciples had been in the synagogue. Now, there he had taught with authority. The people were amazed. A demon-possessed man interrupted, and Jesus dealt with the demon and cast out the demon. Of course, this created a stir around him.

[5 : 09] But they, nonetheless, he and his disciples are able to return to Simon Peter's home. And those who have studied these things have come to the fairly confident conclusion that archaeological remains in what was Capernaum, the site of what was Capernaum, would confirm that the synagogue was there. Indeed, there is evidence of that first-century synagogue. But also, curiously, what may well have been the home that is made reference to here. And it was indeed very close.

And so, it would have been a very simple thing for Jesus and the disciples to leave the synagogue and head to Simon Peter's home. And that is what they do. And there, of course, they are met with this reality that Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Whether that had already been the case earlier in the day, we don't know. Certainly, this is what they discover on their arrival at the home.

The disciples make this known to Jesus, and Jesus makes His way to where this sick woman is lying in bed.

And what happens? Well, we read what happens in verse 31. So, He went to her, took her hand, and helped her up. The fever left her, and she began to wait on them.

Now, as miracles go, and in the gospel accounts, of course, we have many accounts of miracles. As miracles go, this was not one of the more dramatic ones. Very gently, in circumstances where it would seem not many people would have been able to witness what was taking place. But there is a beautiful simplicity to the healing that Mark here records. And not only a beautiful simplicity, but a touching tenderness to the manner in which this miracle was carried out, Jesus went to her, took her hand, and helped it up. It's almost as if as she is being helped up, she is healed of the fever. The fever left her, and it would seem that not only did the fever leave her, but she regained her strength in a way that was also miraculous. We all know what it's like, even when we have been down with a fever, and it leaves us. We're still drained and exhausted. But it would seem that the healing touch of Jesus not only healed her of her fever, but restored her to full strength. So, this is what Jesus does. He heals this woman, but why does He do it? How can we respond to that inquiry that we make? Why does

[8 : 12] Jesus heal Simon's mother-in-law? Now, here we could make the mistake of overanalyzing that question, and we do happily acknowledge that at the heart of the answer to that question is the love and compassion of Jesus. Jesus simply is moved to compassion by the woman's condition. He's motivated by love for her person. That was true of so many that He were brought to Him, indeed men and women who He knew nothing about. In this case, of course, there was a much closer connection. This was the mother of one of His, or the mother-in-law of one of His disciples, and He loves her, and He tenderly heals her.

But of course, as we continue reading the passage, it's not just this woman laid low with a fever, but as a result of this miracle, the crowds begin to gather. And though Mark is economical in giving us the details of what occurred, we can imagine, we can visualize perhaps in some measure the scene of human misery and despair that gathered in the courtyard of Peter's house. Mark speaks of the whole town.

Well, presumably, this is dramatic language. It wouldn't have been everybody without exception, but there were crowds gathered, and perhaps from further afield, they had to wait until the Sabbath had ended. But once the sun set, they all gather. And how many stories there of pain and hopelessness could have been told? Had some reporter gathered there and asked people to tell their story?

What sad stories would have been told? How many tortured souls gathered on that Sabbath evening as the sun set over the Sea of Galilee? And Jesus has compassion on them, and He heals them, the sick and the deranged, the broken and the oppressed. They all experience the tender, healing touch of Jesus.

He heals because He loves them. He heals because He loves them. But He heals also that He might reveal something of who He is and what He is like, of what is valuable in His eyes, of why He came into the world at all. And as we witness Him, healing this woman and healing those who gather, we discover one who is marked by love and compassion. We discover one who values those who are on the fringes of society, those who are deemed to be of perhaps no value. What value could there be in a deranged man?

[11:17] All he does is cause trouble and heartache to his family and those around him. Far from being of value, he's a burden. He's a burden. But that is not how Jesus saw a man in that condition. Or what value in a woman who is struck down by disease, unable to attend to her family or participate in the normal activities of life? What value in such a woman? And yet that is not the way Jesus sees such a woman.

Jesus values those whom society perhaps deems to be of no value, those deemed to be beyond the pale, beyond redemption. But as He heals, He not only reveals what He is like, a man marked by compassion and love, not only does it tell us something of who He values and the value He places on men and women, whatever their condition. But He also gives us a glimpse of why He came. Jesus came into this world to restore and renew a fallen and broken world. He came to liberate men and women suffering from the curse of the fall and the pain and brokenness of a sin-sick world. That is why He came. And even as He heals these people gathered in Capernaum, we're given a glimpse of that bigger picture. He came to bring hope to the hopeless. He came to bring freedom to the oppressed. He came to bring wholeness for the broken. And the miracles that evening in Capernaum give us then that little glimpse of the great and even cosmic redemptive purpose that lay behind His coming. Jesus heals. And as He heals, He reveals something of who He is and what He's like. But what can we say of the outcome of this act of healing?

And very particularly, perhaps focus on Simon's mother-in-law. What does a woman healed by Jesus do? What we're told there in verse 31, the fever left her and she began to wait on them. How do you react to that description of what this healed woman does? She began to wait on them. Is there maybe a sense of disappointment? Perhaps she was better off in bed with a fever rather than being healed to a life of servile drudgery, waiting on the men of the house. Is that what she was healed for? Is that the best that we can discover of this woman healed by Jesus? Well, she was healed to serve. But there is no greater calling in the kingdom of God than service. It's interesting that the word that is translated here in verse 31. She began to wait on them. It's the same word that is used of the angels in verse 13.

Remember, in the context of Jesus' temptation, then in verse 13, at the very end, we have this little detail, and angels attended Him. And even if we're not altogether clear what that involved, it's the same word that is used. So, when we read of this woman healed by Jesus, waiting on them, we're not to see this as some unworthy, menial task. This is a high calling to which she is called. She is healed to serve. Well, if that changes our perspective somewhat on what this woman does, well, that's nothing compared to what we can go on to read of Jesus Himself identifying His calling in this same gospel. In Mark chapter 10 and verse 45. What does Jesus say concerning the place of service in the kingdom of God? He says this, For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

In the kingdom of God, the highest calling is to serve others. We are saved to serve. We are healed to help. Simon's mother-in-law, quite unbeknown to her, I imagine, is giving an object lesson of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. The fever left her, and she began to wait on them. She began to serve them.

[16 : 11] She began to help them. Does that characterize you as a disciple of Jesus? This is what we are called to, that the servant is not greater than his master. Jesus identifies His mission, His ministry, His calling as one of service. Then that must also be our calling. Of course, the healing also produces a less helpful outcome. The demanding crowds gather. The evicted demons conspire. Well, Jesus, as we've read, cares for the crowds. He silences the demons. And while this isn't really our principal concern, we just pose the question, why does He do that? Why does Jesus silence the demons? Well, we're given part of the answer in the end of verse 34, but He would not let the demons speak because they knew who He was. Why was that a problem? Why was it a problem? Would it not have been a good thing had they revealed His identity? In trying to think about why Jesus silenced them on this occasion, in this moment in His ministry, the point is often made, and I think it's a valid one, that Jesus did not want at this point in His ministry to be identified as the Messiah, because there were so many false expectations as to who the Messiah was and what the Messiah would do that had the people come to that conclusion, then it could have distracted Him from His mission. And there's something in that. But I wonder if there isn't something more fundamental to Jesus silencing the demons, not allowing them to identify

Him. Is it not to do with His very identity as the servant of the Lord, of whom we read in Isaiah 42, one characterized by restraint and humility. Jesus had no time or desire for fanfare or fame, and so He silenced them. Jesus heals. But then also Jesus prays. There is this early start that we read of from verse 35. Jesus prays. It had been an exhausting Sabbath, and yet what does Jesus do? 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. Well, we're told that that's what He does. We're not told what He prays. We're not told why He prays.

Let's think a little about that question. Why did Jesus pray? Well, Jesus needed the help of His heavenly Father. He needed help from His Father on a number of fronts. I think one of the fronts on which He needed His Father's help was to resist temptation. We know that when the devil left Him, having tempted Him in the wilderness, as one of the gospel writers tells us, He left Him until a more opportune time or another opportunity. And I wonder if even at this early stage, only days have passed, and yet I wonder if here already temptation was very much before Jesus. The temptation of popularity, the temptation of success.

Everybody was clamoring for Jesus. He was the man to go to. He was the man who could heal your sick. And I wonder if Jesus was tempted by all of this popularity that He was being enveloped by, and He needs to go and pray and be with His Father and be reminded of the mission that He has been given.

He needs help that He would be restored and renewed and strengthened for His mission, help that only His Father can give Him. He needs guidance and direction that He might retain His focus and direction.

[20 : 33] And so, while it was still dark, very early in the morning, He seeks out a solitary place, and He prays. Serving the lost drives Him to prayer, and prayer then drives Him to continue serving the lost.

Of course, as we read, the disciples are less than impressed. There is so much to do, and Jesus is nowhere to be found. They awake, no doubt, sometime later. And where's Jesus? The crowds are beginning to gather again. Many have passed the word to others, maybe in outlying villages, you've got to come to Capernaum. You won't believe what this Jesus can do. And the people are gathering.

And the disciples see this as an opportunity for further fame and further success. And where's Jesus? He's not there. Where has He gone? And so they seek Him out, thinking, well, here is an opportunity. Here we are, four disciples, Jesus and four disciples. Well, here we could multiply the number. Here there are many willing recruits. Who wouldn't want to be with our Master? Why just four? Why not 400 or 4,000? But Jesus is praying, and the disciples are not impressed.

Surely there are better things, more important things to be doing. I wonder if that's sometimes something that we can think, even if we don't verbalize it. It's certainly the opinion of many that praying is a waste of time. It's a religious ritual that doesn't actually achieve anything real.

In the context of the terrible tragedy in Paris at the weekend, a Charlie Hebdo cartoonist, and I won't be able to pronounce this, but Joanne Sfar, it's a male, he posted a cartoon on Instagram.

[22 : 43] I think it was on Saturday morning. And the cartoon carried the following text. Friends from the whole world, thank you for hashtag PrayForParis. But we don't need more religion.

Our faith goes to music, kisses, life, champagne, and joy. Now, I acknowledge the courtesy with which he expresses his protest in asking that people not pray for Paris. And obviously, he's coming from his own perspective. He's grateful for the concern. And yet, in these words, we see how man clings to his foolish autonomy, autonomy, and self-sufficiency, even in the midst of tragedy and crisis. Whoever we need, it's not God. Whoever can help us, it's not God. Don't pray for us.

Well, I wonder if the disciples had something of that. More important things to do, surely, than to pray. The outcome, of course, for Jesus of this time in a solitary place with his Father is that he is renewed and energized and strengthened and given clarity and decision to go and to do, which takes us on to the third of his activities that Mark makes reference to, what we described as his priority, a priority task, Jesus preaches. What happens when the disciples do find him with the clear intention of bringing him back to attend the multitudes? Well, Jesus tells them what he must principally do, what his great priority is, and that is to preach. The manner in which he says so is very striking.

It leaves no room for doubt. In verse 38, you have this implied rebuke of the disciples. In verse 37, everyone is looking for you. They're not simply conveying information. It is, I think, I think we can reasonably conclude an implied rebuke. What are you doing here? And Jesus replied, let us go somewhere else, not to Capernaum, not to the crowds, not to the gathering masses. No, let's go somewhere else, to the nearby villages. Why? So that I can preach there also. And he could have left it there. But he goes on, that is why I have come. Now, isn't it striking there, the emphasis that Jesus places. That is why I have come. I haven't come principally to heal or to cast out demons. Yes, driven by compassion and love for the needy. I do that, and I can do that. I'm willing to do that.

But that's not what I've principally come. I've come to preach. I've come to deliver a message. Of course, for the disciples, preaching is good, but healing is so much more exciting, so much more effective. If it's crowds you're looking for, then healing is the way to go.

[26 : 20] But Jesus has come to preach. He is a man with a message. He has been sent to proclaim the good news of God, and the villages of Galilee must hear the message he brings. He must call them to repent and believe. This is his great task. This is why I have come to use his own words.

Why so? Why does he preach? Why is preaching his priority? Well, maybe we can answer that question in just one way. No doubt it could be answered from different angles, but let's just limit ourselves to one way in answering that question, comparing the impact and effect of healing and preaching in the ministry of Jesus. Now, the initial impact of healing seems so much more effective, but let's just think about it. Think about Peter's mother-in-law, or Simon as he's spoken of here, Simon Peter. Think of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. She was in bed with a fever, and she was healed.

That much is clear. Now, I wonder, I pose the question, do you think that she was ever laid low again with a fever? What do you think? I don't know how old she was, how many years she went on to live, but what do you think? Do you think she ever had a fever again? I imagine she did. We don't know.

We're not told. But one thing I do know, one thing that doesn't require any speculation on my part, is that this woman, who had been healed by Jesus in this miraculous way, this woman died.

Indeed, every last one of the men, women, and children healed on that Sabbath evening in Capernaum, went on to live lives characterized by failing health and ultimate death. That is the reality.

[28 : 20] Yes, they had this marvelous experience that granted them a measure of relief, and they were grateful for it. And they would look back, and they would remember the occasion when Jesus healed them. But often they would look back and remember that occasion in their sickbed.

You see, in terms of their physical makeup, nothing fundamentally changed. Still prone to sickness, still prone to disease, and still ultimately prone to death. What Jesus did, welcome though it was, did not provide anything more than temporary relief from the ravages of the fall. But his preaching, the preaching of the good news of God, now that's another matter. The preaching of the gospel is God's means of bringing the dead to life. Jesus came with words of eternal life. Remember what Peter said, the same Peter that we read of in this passage. What did Peter say, as recorded for us in John's gospel in chapter 6, when many were leaving Jesus behind, and Jesus says to the disciples, will you also go? And what does Peter say, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. You have words of eternal life that bring life to the dead. I wonder if you're convinced.

How often have you heard folks say, maybe you've said it yourself, as long as I've got my health, that's what really matters. Isn't that a common expression that people use? I know where people are coming from. Something I could easily say myself. But think about it. Is that actually what really matters? What shall it profit a man if he boasts a beautiful body brimming with health health? And loses his soul? You can be healed and go to hell. That's a sobering reality. You can be healed, miraculously healed in a way that would amaze medical science, and still go to hell. It's not that your body that your body. It's not that your body is unimportant, but of greater concern is your soul.

How's your soul, my friend? What can save your soul is not a healing miracle, but words of eternal life.

Repent and believe the gospel. Believe words of eternal life, and you will be saved. And if preaching or proclaiming, sharing, announcing the good news was the priority for Jesus, it must surely be the priority for his disciples, for you and me. We need to tell people about Jesus. We need to proclaim the good news. We need to tell the world that there is a man who has conquered death, that there is hope. We need to tell the doubting and the skeptical and the angry and the downcast and the self-sufficient that there is a God who hears and answers prayer. The same God who gives us music and kisses and life and champagne and joy. Jesus heals. He heals because he loves the hurting, and he heals as a foretaste of what awaits in the new heavens and the new earth, where there will be no more disease or pain or death.

[32 : 09] Jesus prays. He cherishes fellowship with his Father. He needs his Father's help, and he prays. Jesus preaches. He preaches the good news of God. Let us listen and believe, and as we believe, let us do likewise, the world needs to know about this Jesus, and you need to do the telling. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to you, and we thank you for your Son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for his coming into this world. We thank you that he was a man with a mission and a man with a message.

We thank you for his message. We thank you for his message, the good news of God. We thank you for his mission to bring to fruition the kingdom of God, to undertake this mission of redemption for sinners such as we are. We thank you for the life he lived. We thank you for the death he died. We thank you that his mission and death were vindicated by his resurrection. We thank you that even now as we pray, we pray in his name, for we can come in no other name. And we pray that we would know what it is not only to listen to Jesus and to believe the message that he brings, but that we as his disciples would also be those who share with others the good news of God, the good news concerning Jesus, your Savior. And we pray these things in his name. Amen.