

The Compassion of Christ

Eric C. Coher

Mark 1:35-45

In the wake of disaster or tragedy it's not an uncommon event for the sitting President of the United States to travel to an affected location and survey the devastation. They oftentimes seek to encourage those affected by assuring that funds and resources will be sent to aid in the necessary relief efforts. But rarely, if ever, does the President roll up his sleeves and include himself in the work of cleaning up the mess – he's usually in and out. But that's not how Jesus responds to the spiritual disaster and tragedy in the hearts of men. He's not in and out; He "rolls up His sleeves" and gets neck deep in the wreckage of sin in human hearts. His purpose wasn't to send temporary relief, but rather to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). We find Him immersed in the ministry of prayer, preaching, and rescuing those tattered by the effect of the fall. That's the picture that I want you to have in your mind as we turn our attention to this morning's text. Let me encourage you to stand, if you're able, as we read God's Word. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and 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, for a proof to them." But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter. Mark 1:35-45

1. JESUS' FELLOWSHIP WITH THE FATHER WAS MARKED BY PRAYER (vs.35-37)

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you."

To say that the text before us this morning was preceded by a whirlwind day of ministry for Jesus would be a massive understatement. Jesus, accompanied by His four new disciples (Peter, Andrew, James and John), had spent the afternoon in the synagogue teaching. Crowds grew and the excitement level soared as the sound of a man unlike the Scribes and Pharisees filled the air. Not only were the crowds captivated by the fact that Jesus taught with astounding authority, but verse 23 seems to infer that Jesus paused mid-sentence while teaching to cast an unclean spirit out of a man. So floored were those in attendance that verse 27 says, "And they were all amazed, so [much so] that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'" Verse 28 tells us that Jesus immediately became somewhat of an icon throughout the region of Galilee. Mark wrote, "At once His fame spread everywhere throughout the region of Galilee." In today's language we would say that the news about Jesus went viral.

That afternoon was followed by an equally stirring evening. After leaving the synagogue, Jesus and His followers came to the home of Peter's mother-in-law, who had been ill with a fever. Jesus, full of compassion, took her by the hand, raised her up in bed, and made her well. Tired from the events of the day, the group settled in for dinner as the sun dropped out of sight. There seems to be a still moment in the midst of a Sabbath day immersed in ministry - and then there's a knock at the door. You see the Sabbath ended at sundown and with the conclusion of the Sabbath the ill and deranged could be legally carried to Jesus. As the door to Peter's mother-in-law's home swung open, Jesus' view was flooded with a throng of sick and needy people. Mark tells us that the whole city was gathered together at the door. And the text says that Jesus spent the night, probably into the early hours of the morning, healing those with diseases and casting out demons. This is the context we need to keep in mind as we come to verse 35!

Verse 35 says, "Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." The thrill of the day had turned into the still of the night. While everyone was exhausted from the long day of ministry, I can almost imagine Jesus lying quiet, but awake in bed, with the brokenness of humanity heavy on His heart and mind. Whether He slept or not we don't know; but sometime in the early hours of the morning, Jesus noiselessly left the house and sought much needed fellowship with His Father. These are the types of mornings that we struggle to pull ourselves from bed. These are the types of mornings that we justify extra sleep. But for Jesus, sleep wasn't what was most necessary. Private prayer was infinitely more important. We learn three important things about Jesus' prayer life from this passage.

A. It was planned. The phrase “very early” means, “exceedingly early.” The time reference that Mark uses places this time of prayer during the fourth watch of the night, which was between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. There’s precedent for early morning prayers in many other passages of Scripture. The prophet Isaiah writes, “Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught” Isaiah 50:4. Listen to how the psalmist talks about his fellowship with God in the morning:

O LORD, in the *morning* you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch. Evening and *morning* and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice, Psalm 55:17. But I will sing of your strength; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the *morning*. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress, Psalm 59:16. But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the *morning* my prayer comes before you, Psalm 88:13. Satisfy us in the *morning* with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days, Psalm 90:14. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the *morning*, more than watchmen for the *morning*, Psalms 130:6. Let me hear in the *morning* of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul, Psalm 143:8.

Spurgeon once said, “Look no man in the face until you have seen the face of God. Speak with no one until you have spoken with the Most High.” The first hour of the morning often serves as the rudder for the rest of your day. What takes place in those first 60 minutes you are awake sets the course of your day. Commit to spend those early minutes in the presence of God, communing with Him.

B. It was private. Notice that Jesus found a private place to pray. The word “desolate” is the same word used for the wilderness and means, “lonely and deserted.” Luke 5:16 says, “But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.” Do you have a private place for prayer? Jesus encourages us to find one in Matthew 6:6, “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

C. It was prolonged. It’s interesting to note that the Greek verb *prayed* in verse 35 is in the imperfect tense. Jesus didn’t hop up in the morning for a brief prayer walk. The picture here is Jesus laboring in prayer through the early hours of the morning. Jesus had no conveniences for securing quiet, but He made them. The hilltop was His chamber, and darkness His bolted door. He had no time for prayer, but He made time, rising “a great while before day.” Say not you have no time or secret place for prayer. Where there is a will there is a way to get [them] both (*R. Glover*).

There is a great lesson for us here... If Jesus, the eternal, incarnate, Son of God, the One who is the exact imprint of the Father’s nature (Hebrews 1:3), the One who spoke all things into existence and who holds all things together (Colossians 1:17), drew His strength, power, guidance, even His words from communing with the Father in prayer, how much more do we? J.C Ryle says:

Sinless as he was, He set us an example of diligent communion with God. If He who was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners thus prayed continually, how much more ought we who are compassed with infirmity? A praying Master like Jesus can have no prayerless servants. Those who ask little must expect to have little. Seeking little, they cannot be surprised if they possess little. It will always be found that when prayers are few, grace, strength, peace, and hope are small.¹

We come up with so many excuses for our shallow prayer lives. I think the number one excuse for our lack of prayer is oftentimes busyness. The problem isn't that we are too busy; the problem is that we've deceived ourselves into believing that we are as busy as we think we are. We don't fail to pray because we are pressed for time, we fail to pray because we've perverted our priorities. Adoniram Judson once said, "You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed." What a model Jesus has given us of humble dependence on God. Do you rise early in the morning and eagerly anticipate prayerful fellowship with God?

Look at verses 36-37. Mark says, "And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." Most of our translations miss the force of the original text here. A better translation would be - Simon and those who were with him "hunted Jesus down". Those of you who have small children are well acquainted with this feeling. It can be difficult at times to even find a few minutes in solitude. Here, Jesus is seeking solitude with His Father when His followers interrupt Him.

Peter's response to Jesus communicates frustration – even the sound of a mild rebuke. Peter can't understand why in the world Jesus was retreating to pray when it seemed as if revival was breaking out the night before and the crowds have returned for more. What Peter is implying here is, "Jesus, you're going to miss the opportunity to capitalize on your popularity to promote your mission. There's an open door for ministry and you're out here hanging out by yourself." Peter's misunderstanding of Jesus' actions reveals a poor perspective that we can often have – when things are seemingly favorable, we don't need God's help.

It's interesting to note that Peter's interruption here is a foreshadowing of another interruption in Mark 8 where Peter tries to prevent Jesus from fulfilling His mission. Mark writes, "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" Mark 8:31–33.

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 14.

Jesus was being directed by the desires of His Father rather than the response of the crowds who followed Him. Jesus knew that many of those who sought Him had no appetite to hear His word, but were only interested in His miracles. They cared not about His identity, but only what He could do for them. As a matter of fact, the word “seeking” or “looking for” occurs 10 times in the gospel of Mark in reference to Jesus and all 10 references are negative. “Seeking” connotes an attempt to determine and control rather than to submit and follow. In this respect, seeking for Jesus is not a virtue in the Gospel of Mark, nor are clamoring crowds a sign of success [in] ministry. Enthusiasm, not to be confused with faith, can actually oppose faith.² And for that reason, Jesus elevates the primacy of His mission - preaching the gospel!

2. JESUS’ MINISTRY WAS FOCUSED ON PREACHING (vs. 38-39)

And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Jesus’ response to Peter and his search party almost seems a little counter-intuitive. You might expect Jesus to be excited by the news that everyone is looking for Him. But the clamoring crowd was not a sign of success to Jesus. Jesus knew that the crowd was curious, not convicted; happy, not humbled, aroused, but not repentant. This is the picture in a number of churches today. Jesus wasn’t interested in accumulating a mass of followers who were interested in His miracles but did not receive Him as their Messiah. Jesus told the crowd who followed Him after He had fed the 5,000, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” John 6:26.

Jesus’ answer indicates the disciples’ failure to understand Him or His mission. Jesus’ mission was that of an evangelist not a miracle worker. Ultimately, Jesus is the anointed Prophet that Isaiah writes about in Isaiah 61 when he says, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” And what is this prophet’s message? Look back at verse 15. Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” Mark 1:15.

Though the enthusiastic crowds would be content to use Jesus for his miracles, and Peter and his companions misunderstood His ultimate purpose at this point, still Jesus remains undeterred from His mission. He had come to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), to heal our spiritual sickness, not just our physical infirmities. Jesus said of Himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” Matthew 20:28. That’s the message of the gospel.

² James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 67.

That is the message that must fill the content of our preaching. The anemic, man-centered preaching that emanates from pulpits in many churches on any given Sunday morning may bring people into the church, but it will never bring them into the Kingdom. The only way people ever come into God's Kingdom is by hearing His heralds proclaim a crucified King. Jesus came to fulfill a prophetic office, to be the Prophet greater than Moses, to be the Prophet who had been so long foretold.

It's interesting to note that in verse 35, Jesus "goes out" to pray. In verse 39, He "goes out" to preach. What do we learn here? We learn that prayer and ministry are indispensable. Jesus, though He is God in the flesh, doesn't extend himself outward in ministry without first communing with the Father, the source of His mission, in prayer. A wise man once asked me, "Will you spend more time talking to men about God or more time talking to God about men?" The question isn't meant to suggest a false dichotomy – both are necessary. But it is interesting how spending time with God often compels us outward in ministry. Jesus' purpose was not to heal as many people as possible, but to confront men with the demand for decision in the perspective of God's absolute claim upon their lives. Jesus came to preach the gospel. After those early hours in prayer with His father, Jesus tells his young followers, much to their amazement, "Let's move on."

3. JESUS' HEART WAS MOVED WITH PITY (vs. 40-45)

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and 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, for a proof to them." But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

As Jesus moved on, preaching the gospel in other towns, so moved His rising popularity. Word about Jesus' power had breached the borders of Capernaum where Jesus first taught in the synagogue and had rippled outward into the surrounding region – even to the isolated huts of the leper colonies that were located outside the cities in which Jesus taught. At least one leper was so enraptured at the thought of being cleansed by Jesus that he broke every social custom and legal regulation to come and throw himself at Jesus' feet.

This was a bold and incredibly offensive encounter because lepers have long been regarded as a grave threat to purity. If you are looking for an interesting read, Leviticus 13 and 14 serve as somewhat of an Old Testament dermatology manual. In these chapters, God gave strict guidelines to Moses about how leprosy (a general classification for a myriad of skin disorders) was to be treated. God said, "The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his

head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean'. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp" Leviticus 13:45–46. These regulations were really a display of God's grace. The Israelites lived in tents during the years that they wandered in the wilderness. The close proximity of the living arrangements meant that an outbreak of leprosy had the potential to spread quickly throughout the camp.

By Jesus' time, the regulations given to Moses by God had become grossly misapplied by rabbinical teaching. If a leper entered a house the house was considered unclean. If a leper stood under a tree, all who passed under it were considered unclean. It was illegal to greet a leper. If a leper came into contact with a clean person, the clean person would be deemed unclean. For that reason, a leper was required to stand at a distance, sometimes up to fifty paces depending on the direction of the wind, from a person without leprosy. Leprosy robbed a person of their name, occupation, family, fellowship, and worship community. They were oftentimes referred to as the "living dead". This isn't simply a description of an illness...it's a sentence. And the reality is that anyone who has never trusted Christ alone for their salvation is spiritually in worse shape than this man was physically.

Leprosy, like most diseases, was the subject of widespread superstition and fear. It was often regarded as divine punishment for sin - God's way of exiling the wicked. Remember the instance in John 9 when Jesus and His disciples encountered the man who had been blind from birth? How did they respond? They asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus [dispelling their superstition] answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" John 9:2–3. That's the context we need to keep in mind in order to understand the offense of the leper's encounter with Jesus. This leper is breaking both law and custom when he comes to Jesus begging to be made clean. Notice that the leper doesn't question Jesus' ability to cleanse him, only His willingness. He says, "If you will, you can make me clean." The leper understood that he had no hope apart from Jesus. This is a lesson that we would all do well to learn.

Some teachers today tell you to approach Jesus and demand your healing because you deserve it. They tell you to claim your healing because God owes it to you. They tell you to say you've been healed and the positive confession will make it happen. Friends, we need to be reminded that God is not our slave or our genie. He is to be approached with confidence, yet reverence, with faith, but also with fear and trembling. Look at how this leper approached Jesus. It is a picture of how we are to approach Jesus for salvation.

1. He came to Jesus with truthful acknowledgment of his need.
2. He came to Jesus with acknowledgment of His Divine sovereignty.
3. He came to Jesus with great earnestness.
4. He came to Jesus with deep humility.

5. He came to Jesus in simple faith.

Look at Jesus' response. Verse 41 says, "Moved with pity (*σπλαγχνίζομαι*), [Jesus] stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." We would expect any pious Jew who was preoccupied with his cleanliness to recoil in protection and defense, but not Jesus. In Jesus' response we see that compassion replaces contempt. Rather than turning from the leper, Jesus turns to him.

Jesus healed many people many different ways, but here He chose to heal this man with a touch. He could have spoken a word or even just thought a thought and the man would have been healed, but Jesus touched Him. This is significant because people were forbidden to touch this man on account of his leprosy. Luke's account (cf. 5:12) tells us that the man was *full* of leprosy. He had been a leper a long time and the disease was in an advanced stage. It's safe to say that this man hadn't felt a loving touch for some time. But Jesus touched the untouchable.

Notice also that Jesus is not only *able* to cleanse the leper, but *desirous* to do so. He says, "I will; be clean." Many other times Jesus healed without a touch. But here, in this instance, Jesus, the theanthropic (God-man) reaches out his hand and touches the leper's spots. And unlike any other rabbi, Jesus isn't polluted by the leper's disease; rather the leper is cleansed by the contagious holiness of the Son of God.³ *Immediately* the leprosy left the man and he was made clean. Jesus then gave the man two instructions:

1. Don't tell anyone that I have cleansed you (v. 44a).
2. Go and show yourself to the priest and follow the traditional rite of cleansing (v.44b).

We don't know if the man obeyed Jesus' instruction to go to the priest, but we do know that he disobeyed Jesus' instruction to not to tell anyone. In spite of Jesus' stern warning to the leper to "say nothing to anyone", verse 45 says that he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around. The leper is preaching, but unfortunately he's preaching the wrong message. You won't find Jesus in a miracle; you'll find Him at the cross.

While there is no justification for the leper's disobedience, it's interesting that when Jesus told this man to remain silent, he disobeyed and told everyone. Sadly, Jesus tells us to go and spread the news, and we are all too often disobediently silent. J.C. Ryle said, "The majority of Christians are far more inclined to be silent about their glorious Master than confess Him before men. [Most of us] do not need a bridle as much as a spur."⁴

³ James R. Edwards, 70.

⁴ J.C. Ryle, 20.

The Leper had more zeal than he had discretion. What was the result? Look at the end of verse 45. The result of the leper's disobedience was that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places. Can you see the irony here? Jesus began his ministry inside the city while the leper was on the outside - in the desolate places (wilderness). But notice where the two end up; Jesus, like a leper is now forced outside the city to the desolate places, while the leper is reestablished in the community. Jesus relieved the leper of his burden, but in publicizing the news, the leper imposes a burden on Jesus. Jesus and the leper have traded places. Mark 1:40-45 is a beautiful picture of the gospel.

WE ARE THE LEPER (Lessons from the text)

1. We are the leper of Mark 1:40-45 - We are unclean because of our sin.

There is a foul soul-disease, which is engrained into our very nature and cleaves to our bones and marrow with deadly force. That disease is the plague of sin. Like leprosy, it is a deep-seated disease, infecting every part of our nature, heart, will, conscience, understanding, memory, and affections. Like leprosy it makes us loathsome and abominable, unfit for the company of God, and unmeet for the glory of heaven. Like leprosy, it is incurable by any earthly physician, and is slowly but surely dragging us down to the second death. And worst of all, far worse than leprosy, it is a disease from which no mortal man is exempt. We are all, apart from Christ, like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away (cf. Isaiah 64:6).⁵

2. Just like leprosy acts as an anesthetic, so our sin numbs us to the heinous nature of sin.

3. Just as leprosy was incurable and fatal, so our sin is incurable and fatal apart from Jesus Christ.

Mark's account of Jesus and the leper is a graphic image of the tragic realities of sin in the human heart. Like leprosy, sin infects the whole person, and it is ugly, loathsome, corrupting, contaminating, alienating, and incurable by man. Friends, do you know this about yourself? Have you discovered your sinfulness, guilt, and corruption? Happy indeed is the person who has been really taught to feel that he is a miserable sinner. Blessed indeed is he who has learned that he is a spiritual leper, and a bad, wicked, sinful creature! To know our disease is one step toward a cure. It is the misery and the ruin of many souls that they have yet to see their sin and their need.⁶

4. Jesus is merciful and compassionate towards sinners.

Jesus desires (is willing for) all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 2:4

⁵ J.C. Ryle, 18.

⁶ Ibid.

5. Jesus is our substitute, He exchanges His righteousness for our guilt and sin.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:20–21

6. The moment that a sinner calls on the name of Christ, he is made clean.

When a man or woman comes to Jesus in humble faith and repentance, Jesus pays our sin penalty, justifies us, and credits His righteousness to our account. Jesus is our substitute. What an exchange! Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 2 Corinthians 5:17

In 1759 Joseph Hart penned the words to the cherished hymn *Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy*:

*Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus, ready, stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.
He is able, He is able;
He is willing; doubt no more.*

*Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.
This He gives you, this He gives you,
'Tis the Spirit's glimmering beam.*

*Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Bruised and broken by the fall;
If you tarry 'til you're better,
You will never come at all.
Not the righteous, not the righteous;
Sinners Jesus came to call.*

CLOSING BENEDICTION

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear these words from Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:14, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” And all God’s people said, “Amen!” Go in peace!