



THE PAIN OF POPULARITY

Catalog No. 1106

Mark 1:35-45

Fifth Message

Brian Morgan

November 9th, 1997

In our last study in the gospel of Mark we looked at day one of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. Mark highlighted the explosive authority that Jesus demonstrated in his teaching, his confrontation with demons, and healing the sick. No one in Israel had seen anything like it since the days of Elijah. As a result, in the space of twelve hours our Lord's reputation had spread like wildfire through Galilee. What will happen to the boy carpenter from Nazareth, and what direction will his ministry take now that he has been accorded such popular acclaim?

Would you like to be famous? If you would, know that notoriety is wrought with danger. Fame opens the floodgates to forces that few survive. People come through the gateway of fame as friends, but they can do more damage to you than your enemies. When the United States women won the team medal in gymnastics at the last Olympics, the image of their coach carrying off his wounded hero in his arms had scarcely faded from the screen before a ravenous host of marketing agents were bidding for the lives of these young girls. Fresh bait in a sea of piranhas. I didn't know whether to rejoice or weep over the medal. If you look behind the mask of almost any celebrity today you will see the wounds that have been inflicted from their being used, abused, and in some cases, crucified. Do you want to be famous? Do you think you could survive the constant crush of photographers? The tragic death of Princess Diana demonstrated that society will stop at nothing to use the famous for their own agendas.

There is nothing modern about this phenomenon. In the first century, Jesus' fame exposed him to the same dangers. Everyone wanted a piece of the action; everyone had an agenda. In my opinion, the greatest challenge Jesus faced in his ministry came not from his enemies but from his well meaning friends. How did he survive the applause? How did he stay on course? Our text this morning from the opening chapter of Mark's gospel is made up of two scenes linked by that common theme. In both instances Jesus "goes out" to focus on who he is and why he came. He is confronted by individuals who appear to be his allies, but in their naive goodness they threaten to steer his ship off course. This text had a big impact on Peter (see Acts 6:1-6). It helped the apostle keep the early church focused in a time of crisis. May it have the same impact on us.

I. Escape to the Desert for Prayer (1:35-38)

And in the early morning, while it was still dark,

He arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there. And Simon and his companions hunted for Him; and they found Him, and said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." And He said to them, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for." (NASB)

A. Escape to the desert

Mark has already given us a vivid account of Jesus' exhausting Sabbath day of ministry in Capernaum. Jesus began the day by teaching in the synagogue; next, he cast out a demon; in the afternoon, following his arrival at the home of Peter, the young preacher is called upon to heal Peter's ailing mother-in-law; in the evening, instead of getting much needed rest, he engages multitudes who had invited themselves over, healing more of their sick and casting out demons. What a first day of ministry!

What does Jesus do after a day like that? We need to understand that Jesus was not acting like God, going around doing as he pleased. Jesus was a man through and through. Everything he did he accomplished in complete dependence on the Father, nourished by the Spirit. What he does now is carve out time and space to be alone with his Father. He needed refreshment and time to refocus, just like anyone else.

So he retreats to the *eremos*, the desert. This term is a very significant. In the Bible, the desert is often regarded as the place of divine refreshment following a stressful time. The Hebrew word for desert, *midbar*, means "place of revelation." This was where David fled from Saul to meet with God, and where Elijah withdrew after confronting the priests of Baal. It is the place where Jesus will feed the multitude (Mark 6:31), and it is where the church is taken by God to be nourished by him, in John's apocalyptic vision (Rev 12:6).

The lesson for us is clear: We need uncluttered space and extended quiet to hear the voice of God. These two things were as difficult for Jesus to find as they are for us today. Because of his magnetism, and lest he attract a crowd, Jesus has to steal away while everyone is asleep. Mark, in his vivid, rough style, says it was "early morning, still black out, exceedingly," when Jesus escapes to be alone in the *eremos* to pray. (By contrast, Luke merely says, in 4:42, "when morning came.") If you travel to Galilee, you can still see a cave on the hillside, whose heights have been called *eremos* dating back to AD 385 when they were identified as the location of Jesus' re-

treat.¹ From these heights the entire lake and surrounding villages can be observed. It is quite possible that this was the cave to which Jesus withdrew. Here he prays in solitude, in communion with his Father, and refocuses his ministry—until he is rudely interrupted.

B. Hunted down by the disciples

Jesus is hunted down (the word is used in the Septuagint of pursuing enemies) by his disciples. Peter, who is in the lead, doesn't even knock, but barges into the presence of Jesus, and shouts, "Everyone is looking for you!" Many of us would swallow those words like honey! They bespeak the never-ending applause that reassures us we are loved. Encore! It is the cry that moves us like no other.

C. Remaining focused on the main thing

But Jesus is totally unmoved by that titillating cry. He merely says, "Let us go elsewhere." Prayer has done its work on Jesus. In that dark cave, surrounded by a sea of solitude, he is disconnected from the world's web and is refocused and re-centered in his calling. Jesus is a man with a mission: "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may *preach* there also; for this is what I came out for."

Jesus' primary task is preaching, not healing or deliverance. As important as these are, they are not the main thing. His calling is to go through all of Galilee as an itinerant preacher, announcing that the kingdom of God was near. Healing and deliverance were signs that it was present, but these things were never intended to drive his ministry. His final word, "this is what I came out for," is filled with ambiguity. Does he mean, "this is why I came out to this lonely place"? or, more significantly, "this is why I came out from my Father"?

As an aside, this text gives us insight on how to evaluate modern day healings. I believe that God still does heal today, though not as frequently as in Jesus' day. The healings of Jesus were Messianic in nature, therefore they were more numerous. But even then, they were not the main thing. They pointed to something greater—the arrival of the kingdom of God. It should be no different today. No ministry should be driven by healings. If they are, there is something wrong.

D. The impact on Peter (Acts 6:1-6)

In the book of Acts we learn that it was the memory of Jesus' rebuke to Peter that refocused the apostles to a ministry of "the word of God and prayer" in a time of crisis. In an effort to solve a church dispute among widows, the apostles had been neglecting the word to wait on tables. The memory of this event refocused them. We, too, need to have a clear focus in our fragmented world. Prayer is what will center us on the main thing that God has called us to do (see Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11). We must say no to the good in order to give ourselves to the best.

The next scene depicts Jesus' unwavering tenacity to his primary calling to preach in the wider horizon of

Galilee.

II. Driven Back Out Into the Desert (1:39-45)

And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons. And a leper came to Him, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." And moved with compassion, He stretched out His hand, and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, and He 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 testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.

Undeterred by Peter's plea to heed popular demand, Jesus leaves Capernaum and enters the wider sphere of "preaching" throughout all the synagogues of Galilee, announcing the kingdom of God, and as the sign of its arrival, casting out demons. From that preaching tour, Mark isolates one incident to again show how difficult it was for Jesus to keep his life's work on course in the face of powerful currents of popularity. Jesus encounters a leper, who is moved by our Lord's reputation to approach him. What an amazing sight this must have been for the disciples, to witness a leper approaching a rabbi.

Leprosy, which always results in death, is a terrible disease. Michael Green observes that it is significant that Jesus "healed" all other diseases; leprosy was the one thing he "cleansed."² Of all diseases, leprosy is the most graphic picture of sin that ravages the soul. Beginning with just with a small spot, the leprosy spreads, desensitizes, then it deforms and defaces. It isolates and separates one from family, work, community, even God. As late as the Middle Ages, 1500 years later, lepers carried a bell everywhere they went. They were forced to cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!"

Leviticus 14 has lengthy sacrificial procedures for a leper who had been cleansed, but there is no record that the priests ever performed this function. The only record of any leper being cleansed concerns the case of a Syrian general named Namaan (Luke 4:27). That is, until the Messianic age. The day was coming when the blind would see, the lame would walk and the lepers would be cleansed (Isa 35:5-6; Ezek 36:25, 33; Luke 7:22). So here at last is that touch of Jesus that goes so deep that every cell is cleansed from the ravages of leprosy. The Messianic age had arrived!

A. The faith of the leper

I will make four observations about this incident.

First, notice the faith of the leper. These often unnamed little people in Mark's gospel serve as foils to the disciples, and they are examples of faith. The man says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." He had no question about Jesus' ability to cleanse him; he knew he had the power. There was something in Jesus' teaching and miraculous works that gave him the faith to know our Lord had the power to cleanse him. All it would take was Jesus' willingness to do so. It was that faith that healed him.

B. The emotions of Jesus

Second, notice our Lord's emotions, which prompted him to heal the man. Jesus' reaction to leprosy is the first recorded emotion expressed by him in the gospel of Mark. The Greek text gives two different readings. The first is that he was "moved with compassion," or, better stated, "moved to the guts." The more rare but difficult reading is, "being filled with anger, he said, 'I am willing.'" Was Jesus angry about the ravages of leprosy or angry at the devil for disfiguring a man made in the image of God? We can't be sure. What we do know is that Jesus' healing miracles were a statement that he was waging an all-out war against the devil (Luke 13:16). In either case, here in Jesus' action we see the very heart of God. God is not a stoic, a supreme sovereign unmoved by our plight. He is deeply moved to the gut, moved to anger, and he acts: "I am willing." With but a word the leper is cleansed.

Recently I read an article written by a fourth year medical student describing the first emotions he felt in the emergency room. In the E.R. one night, a homeless old man arrived in a drunken stupor, with a cut in his scalp. The student was asked to assist. Here is what he wrote:

I remember how, holding the curved needle at the end of the needle holder, it felt so awkward, like trying to balance a pin between two metal chopsticks... There are moments in your life that change you forever, and, for me, this was just such a moment. I closed my eyes, twisted my hand, then heard a noise. It was a weird sort of scratching sound, the short staccato of a metal tip, first piercing, then puncturing into human skin, and it all took place in one short inhuman moment. The needle was in, then out. [After several nervous attempts he began to relax.] The conversation drifted to gossip and movies. Finally, one of us said something funny, and both of us began to laugh.

But then the laughter stopped. Beneath the white drape surrounding our sewing, I noticed a trickle of water. Suddenly I remembered that there was a human face beneath this drape, and that these were human tears, which coalesced with the blood droplets on the patient's cheeks to form a steady stream of pink fluid. The scalp is weakly enervated at best, and so between this patient's alcohol ingestion and our own local anesthesia injections, how could he be feeling any pain at all? The attending physician stopped

laughing as well, then he injected more lidocaine solution into the remaining edges of the wound. But the man continued to cry, and his crying began to tie a knot in my stomach. My hands started trembling. I wanted to drop my tools and excuse myself but, instead, I took a deep breath, blinked my eyes and continued to place the remaining four sutures. I had won, but I had also lost, and an innocence left me that day I can never regain. Virginity comes in many forms, and each time it's lost, it represents a moment that changes you for a lifetime.³

This is true of all physicians. In order to heal, they have to lose their innocence and repress all feelings. The good news of the gospel, however, is that God never loses his innocence. He never becomes a stoic. He feels everything right in the gut. It is these emotions that make him willing to cleanse, always.

C. The touch by Jesus

Third, Jesus touches the leper. "By His word alone He might have healed the leper," wrote Calvin, "but He applied...the touch of His hand, to express the feeling of compassion."⁴ This was a touch for which the leper had been waiting a lifetime. But even more amazing is the fact that, rather than the leprosy defiling Jesus, Jesus' holiness cleanses the leper! This is deeply significant. With the coming of Jesus we arrive in the Messianic age, when holiness is intensified. The Old Testament has the concept of holy space: a holy land, a holy city, a holy temple, a holy place, and most holy place. Barriers had to be created to protect that holiness from the constant threat of defilement, because if that which was holy came into contact with what was unclean, the holy never made the unclean holy, rather, the unclean made the holy unclean (Hag 2:12-13). But now comes Jesus, the new living temple of God, and his holiness is so powerful that anything he touches is cleansed.

This has tremendous implications for the church. Jesus is launching a campaign to make the whole world holy and everything we come into contact with holy. No longer do we need to erect barriers and hide in holy enclaves to escape the threat of the world. What we can do instead is go into the world and bring that holiness with us. This principle applies even in marriage between a believer and unbeliever. The believer sanctifies the unbeliever; and the children, too, become holy (1 Cor 7:12-14).

D. The command to secrecy

The fourth thing we notice is Jesus' command to secrecy. If he expressed strong emotions before healing the leper, his emotions are even stronger afterwards. In healing this man, Jesus has placed his mission at great risk. Any misinterpretation of this event would have a huge impact on his ability to function. For this reason, Jesus "severely warned him." This is a strong expression of anger or displeasure. It means "to growl, scold, or censure." Today, we would say that Jesus "got in his face." Jesus practically makes the man take a vow of si-

lence all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. Upon reaching Jerusalem, he was to go to the priests in the temple and present the offering prescribed in Leviticus 14 as a “witness” to them. Once he was healed he had a responsibility to Jesus; he could not just do as he pleased. The leper was to submit his healing to Jesus’ agenda and mission. What a witness this would have been to the priests! They would be forced to research the ancient scrolls, and then perform the prescribed offerings for the first time in Israel’s history. Of course, they would have to ask the man the identity of the one who had healed him. Then would it dawn on them that they were witnessing the Messianic age?

But the story ends in painful irony. Instead of being a witness in Jerusalem, the man becomes a preacher in Galilee (literally: “he began to preach greatly and to spread the word”). Jesus, who had no trouble “casting out” demons, is unable to “cast him out” (v 43) to Jerusalem. Jesus, who is willing and “able” (v 40) to command leprosy to “go away” (v 42), like a faithful servant loses his freedom and is no longer “able” (v 45) to go openly where he pleases, because the leper is unwilling to obey him. The result is that the leper, who once lived on the outside because of his leprosy, now forces Jesus to remain on the outside. Our story ends where it began, in the desert. But now, due to the man’s disobedience, that place of solitude and retreat becomes a bustling city, congested with traffic coming from every direction, for all the wrong reasons. How ironic!

III. One Question: Will you obey?

Do you feel like a leper? Would you like to be cleansed? Then know this: Jesus is willing and able to cleanse you. Your condition of sinfulness moves him deeply. In one touch, that touch of a lifetime, he will

cleanse you. But the question the text leaves us with is this: Once you have been cleansed, will you obey him?

Just as Jesus is refocused by his heavenly Father to preach in scene 1, so he reserves the right to give the leper his focus in scene 2. Jesus did not go about doing as he pleased; he was obedient to his Father. We cannot do as we please, either. We need to obey him and not some other voice, no matter how good it sounds. He reserves the right to make our life a stage for whomsoever he will, and as he directs. But how often we go around, creating our own stage. As we do this, we may report, we may spread the word, but in actuality our independence may have thrust Jesus to the outside of people’s lives and prevented them for years from hearing his message.

Here we see God at his most vulnerable. He risks the whole kingdom on us, and when we disobey, he quietly puts up with all the consequences. This happens again and again. But the good news is, no matter how often it happens, God never loses his innocence. He keeps on cleansing lepers like you and me.

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1. See the outstanding work of Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin, 1992), 36.

2. Special thanks to Michael Green for these thoughts on the nature of leprosy and sin, from his Regent College tapes on *The Gospel of Mark*, 1989. I have depended on his lecture for much of the shape of my sermon.

3. Adam Strassberg, “First Stitch,” *Stanford Magazine* (Stanford Alumni Assoc.) November/December 1997, 86.

4. Quoted by C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1959), 93.