

Please read Mark 1:35-45 ...

We're looking today at two short incidents in Mk 1 and I'm really glad they sit side by side in our Bible. They shed light on a question that churches regularly face, namely what our priority should be when there's so much good ministry we could be doing. Jesus sends us to make disciples, baptizing people and teaching them to follow Him. But along the way we encounter people who need practical help in all sorts of ways, and our heart goes out to them. Yet we can't do everything. So what should we prioritize?

1. THE PRESSURE - AND THE PULL - ON JESUS

Mark has already shown us how Jesus is anointed with the Spirit (v.10) and begins to preach the gospel (v.14). He calls others to join Him in preaching (v.17), and He goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath and begins to teach with great power and authority (vv.21-22). That's His mission!

But Jesus soon encounters people who urgently need other kinds of help. v.23: a demon possessed man! v.30: a sick woman! v.32: the whole town gathered at the door, pleading for healing and deliverance. And the following morning (v.37): *"Everyone is looking for you"* - but not for sermons!

The crowds have their own agenda for Jesus - and it isn't preaching the gospel. The pressure is on Him to make *healing* His life-work. And how His compassionate heart must have been drawn to this! That's something we recognise, isn't it? People's needs are desperate and we naturally want to help. Yet we find ourselves pulled in several directions at once and we can't do everything.

Jesus understands that - He lived under greater pressure than any of us. Are our lives to be dominated and driven by these pressures? NO! Jesus shows us a different course:

2. JESUS PRAYS

v.35: Praying at this moment was clearly very important for Jesus. He must have been exhausted after the previous day, yet He sacrificed a few hours in bed because this is one of those times when prayer is even more important than sleep.

Notice this: Jesus must have prayed thousands of times, yet Mark mentions only three. They're all crisis moments where Jesus needed to be certain of His mission and strong enough to stay on course:

- Here in 1:35, where Jesus has been healing people, and understandably they want more: *"Father, should I concentrate on a healing ministry?"*
- Mk 6:46, where Jesus has been feeding vast crowds. John's gospel tells us how they wanted more. In fact, they wanted to make Jesus an earthly King to sort out their problems (Jn 6:15). *"Father, social justice is really important. Should I make this my life's work?"*
- Mk 14:36, in Gethsemane: *"Father, I'm about to go to the cross - is this really Your will for me?"*

Each time, Jesus emerges from prayer with clarity about what He should do - and with the strength to do it. There's a strength available through prayer that we'll never find any other way.

3. JESUS' PRIORITY IS CLARIFIED AND CONFIRMED: PREACH THE GOSPEL!

v.38: *“Let’s go to the next village so that I can preach ... That is why I have come.”* That’s not what people wanted to hear, but it’s what Jesus must do.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells us three times why He came:

- 1:38 *“I’ve come to preach the gospel!”*
- 2:17 *“I’ve come to call sinners to repentance!”*
- 10:45 *“I’ve come to give my life as a ransom for many!”*

Those three statements make His purpose crystal clear. He came to save sinners – to reconcile us to God.

That’s the key to Jesus ministry. He hasn’t come to be a healer of bodies only, but to be a *Saviour*. His heart is set on achieving a much deeper healing. So He sets out for the next village, because everyone needs the gospel.

If this surprises us, it’s because we’re more bothered by our sicknesses than our sins. But Jesus sees further than we do and He is much more compassionate than we are. If He had settled for a healing ministry it would have been a temporary cover-up of a much deeper problem. People would have been well for a few more years as they grew older and died. But He wouldn’t have provided them with any hope for the future.

He wouldn’t have been a good doctor; He’d have been a very poor one, treating symptoms but not dealing with the root of the problem which is our alienation from God. He’d have done nothing to get people ready for eternity, nothing to restore them to our heavenly Father, nothing to deal with the sin that has thrown all of life out of joint. What good is it if Jesus heals our sickness but we still spend a miserable eternity away from God?

So Jesus commits Himself to preaching the gospel that will save us for eternity. Couldn’t He give us temporary relief as well? He often did. But He won’t pursue a ministry that lets us forget our deeper need, or that keeps Him from dealing with the underlying problem. *“I must go elsewhere to preach, because that is why I came.”*

Is that harsh? Before you decide that you’re more kind-hearted than our Lord Jesus, see what happens next.

4. JESUS MEETS THE URGENT NEED vv.40-45

Jesus sets off on a preaching tour and a man with leprosy sick man pushes himself right in front of Jesus and says *“If you are willing, you can make me clean”* (v.41). In those days leprosy was so feared that sufferers had to live away from other people – they were the ultimate outcasts, and liable to ill-treatment if they approached other people. This man is taking a great risk appearing in public. But he’s in desperate need.

Jesus can heal him – but after what Jesus has just said about the priority of preaching, *will* He heal? Won’t He just ignore this man? NEVER! Some manuscripts say (v.41) Jesus was indignant, others that He was filled with compassion. Both make sense. He’s angered by what sin has done to His creation, and moved to compassion by this man’s need. And He reaches out and touches the untouchable, and heals him.

And we begin to realize that Jesus' conviction that His priority is *preaching* doesn't stifle His *compassion* – it directs it. In fact, His conviction and His compassion fit together beautifully. The conviction sets priorities, not limits! Preaching the gospel is actually the most compassionate thing Jesus can do, and therefore it has priority. Nothing must be allowed to deflect Him from that mission. But when He's confronted with an urgent need, of course He helps – and so should we.

But see how He keeps the priority of the gospel in mind even while He's healing this man! He gives this man him a strong warning: "*Tell nobody!*" (vv.43-44). Go to the priest, fulfil the Old Testament Laws so that you can be reinstated into the community – that's important for this man's welfare. *But when you're back in the community, don't go blabbing about your experience!*

Why does Jesus say this? Because miracles draw crowds for all the wrong reasons. It's not wrong to want a physical healing, but it's wrong to stop there. It's wrong to want Jesus to be your Amazon – a delivery service for all your wishes. He's not going to play that game. It would make Him popular, but it's not why He came. He came to be our Saviour. So Jesus tells this healed man to keep quiet about it, so that He can get on with His gospel ministry.

But what happens next shows why we *need* a Saviour. v.45: the man was immediately disobedient. He had the same problem we all do: he thought he knew better than God. So he shouted his mouth off about what Jesus had done. And the result was that people got the wrong impression of Jesus' ministry, and He couldn't go into a town without being mobbed, He was forced to stay outside (though even then the crowds came looking for Him). That illustrates perfectly why Jesus didn't say, "Bring me your wish list and I'll do whatever you want." Our deepest need, the root of our problem, would never be dealt with. We'd be happy just to have our symptoms treated. Jesus is more far-sighted than that.

KEEP THESE TWO STORIES TOGETHER!

Mark beautifully puts these two paragraphs together so that we see how conviction and compassion fit together in Jesus' life. His priority is to get to the root of our trouble by saving us from our sins. Without that, everything else will be like putting a sticking plaster on a terrible cancer.

But when a pressing need is right in front of Jesus, He addresses that need with compassion and mercy. And we see Jesus doing a very difficult thing: giving proper attention to the needs of the person in front of Him *without* losing the overall sense of where His life is going. He cared about people but He never let the crowds dictate His course. So He met the needs that were right in His face, but He *actively sought* to preach the gospel, and He deliberately went to His death on the cross. That was His priority.

And I'm greatly helped by these two paragraphs! These are very important verses for pastors and churches because we'll always be under pressure to do all sorts of genuinely good things, but there's far more than we're able to do, so we need to know our priorities. And when I think about the mission of the church which is to preach the gospel and make disciples (which is not popular in the world) ... and when I think about social action (which is very popular) ... it's obvious where we'll end up spending all our time UNLESS we're ruled by the word of God.

Our primary job is to tell the message of Christ so that people hear it, believe and have eternal life. And at the same time, we're not to ignore needs that are right in our face – we're to do what it takes to show love and compassion as Jesus did – *but we mustn't stop there!*

Because the biggest need that's everywhere in our face is that people are lost without Christ. They're hungry and thirsty in their souls and they don't know why. They're like lost children. And most of them know next to nothing about the compassionate Saviour who would rescue them and lead them to the home of the Father who would love them forever. And our priority is to tell them that message and introduce them to that Saviour. And if we were to do everything else they ask of us, but never tell them of the One they really need, that's a failure of compassion. And it's not the way of Jesus.

But it takes strength to do the right thing rather than the popular thing – so we must pray. That's what Jesus did. And in His Name we can pray too – for a clear head, and a warm heart, and for His priority to be the priority of Corsham Baptist Church as well.

PRAYER: Father God, we thank You for the love and compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ, shown in so many acts of mercy, and supremely in His death for us on the cross. Help us by Your Spirit to tell the way of salvation, and to demonstrate your love by our care for others. Help us to do this when it's easy and when it's hard; when it's welcomed and when it makes us unpopular. And grant that through our witness people may be drawn to know you and to love you and to give you glory. In Jesus' Name we pray. AMEN.

FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION:

- Jesus came to save sinners. Do you see that this is your greatest need? And have you come to Jesus in repentance and asked Him to bring you home to God?
- What urgent needs require you to act with Jesus' compassion?
- What could you do to prioritize sharing the gospel?