

The Miracle That Failed

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Date: 14 February 1988

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Our Father, as we turn our minds and our hearts to this brief and enigmatic story given to us by St. Mark, we ask that it might fulfill thy purpose, the purpose for which Jesus performed the miracle, Peter remembered the miracle, Mark wrote down the story of the miracle, and we, by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit in studying that story, are indeed to come into your presence and to know you in our midst.

Grant that this grace may be given to us, and we ask because we know it is your purpose and will, and we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

We've all welcomed the families and the children who've come for baptism this morning, and that's very important. It was a happy coincidence, I think, that 1 Corinthians 9 was read as the Olympics are beginning in Calgary, and you can read that over carefully as you watch the Olympics unfold in the next two weeks.

We have, as noted, St. Valentine's Day to remember today, and there he is with a good verse from the Psalms to give you a certain sobriety in the midst of all the frivolities of St. Valentine's Day. And then on Wednesday of this week is Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of the season of Lent, and I wrote a little note about that in the bulletin for you.

[1 : 54] I must say that when I write them, I feel that they are inspired. When I read them, I think they are a disaster. However, I hope they'll be used in a positive way.

What we have to deal with today is the miracle that failed. And I think it failed in some particular ways, but I want you to look at it again on page 34 of the New Testament section, Mark chapter 1 and verse 40 and following.

A leper came to him, seeing, beseeching him, and kneeling, said to him, if you will, you can make me clean.

Now, the leper represents the person in our midst who doesn't belong.

If you were to go back, you'll see how the leper was to be treated or how he was to relate to society, and it's in Leviticus chapter 13 and verse 45.

[3 : 20] This is the leper and the instructions for the leper. The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes, let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, unclean, unclean.

And he shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.

And so he is the person who doesn't belong, the person who is rejected. Now, it is not, I suspect, an uncommon experience, and may be the experience indeed of many of you, as you sit here this morning, to know secretly that you have leprosy.

That is, that you don't belong. And that if you were to stand up and tell the truth and speak from your heart, you would say, unclean, unclean.

Of course, propriety wouldn't allow any of us to do that. But experience tells me that a lot of people feel that nevertheless, that they don't belong.

[4 : 46] And they may well blame the rest of the people here for the smugness with which they apparently do belong, while they alone feel that they don't belong.

And this was not just a matter of what you felt in your own mind and heart with respect to what's happening in Mark chapter 1, but the one who didn't belong because, by reason of his leprosy, was outside the camp, outside the village, outside the town, and it was his business to declare to all passers-by that he was unclean.

A very therapeutic thing to have to do. It helps to come to grips with your own situation. But having come to grips with your own situation, I think you need to learn to do what this man did.

And that is when the Lord Jesus came along, he didn't look at the disciples, he didn't look at the crowd that might have been following.

In fact, this story doesn't suggest that there was anybody there but Jesus and him. And he turned to Jesus and said, If you will, you can make me clean.

[6 : 11] He didn't ask that a campaign be set up to establish a place for lepers in the midst of the covenant community of Israel.

He asked to be made clean. And he asked Jesus to do it. And somehow he recognized that Jesus could do it.

And if surveying the world situation of the Church of Christ and the institutional and established church in the midst of the world and feeling that you are rejected or don't belong to them, then I suggest that that's probably true.

And I think that you would find that in the heart of most of them there would be great sympathy for your feeling. But I also suggest to you that you make it your business with commitment and boldness to know, to recognize, and to approach the person of Jesus Christ who has something very profound he can do for you.

The leper knew what he could do when he said, If you will, you can make me clean. On Saturday of this week we're having a little service in the chapel at 2 o'clock.

[7 : 55] And it's going to be a service of the laying on of hands. And it's not going to be a healing service because healing is much too small a word for the expectations that we have.

And those expectations are not derived from ambition. They're derived, I think, from the reality of God's great purpose for us, of God's will towards us.

And that no matter what our human circumstances may be, to come to the place where we recognize, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

If you will, you can make me the person you want me to be. And that's really the proposition that we want to put before people as we meet together at the Lord's table and as we encourage and pray for one another that we might come to that wholeness and cleanness and salvation indeed which God has promised us.

And which Christ is able to perform in us by the Holy Spirit. Well, that is just an aside to help give you a focus to what I'm telling you this morning.

[9 : 22] The thing that I'd like you to look at in the story of the miracle that failed is that Jesus must have met the leper outside of the town that the RSV says that Jesus was moved with pity and most of the commentaries seem to think that that should be that he is moved with anger.

That is, anger at the impact of this dread disease. anger at the impact of sin in the world.

Anger at the manifestation of this sin in this particular disease. That Jesus was angry.

And maybe that gives us in a sense a warrant to be angry too if Christ was angry.

And there are probably many things which we dismiss from being important, dismiss from the place they should have in our lives, dismiss from the attention that should be given to them.

[10 : 37] And we're not angry. Maybe Christ can restore to us a proper indignant anger at the things that are wrong among us.

That we don't slough them over. That we don't treat them as though they were anything but despised, despicable, and that we need to be rid of them. Maybe the Lord who was angry when he saw the disease of this man and the implications of it was moved with anger.

Then he spoke and he said to them, he addressed the leprous spirit who obeyed his command.

He said, come out of him and he came out of you. He said, be clean and he was clean and healed of his leprosy. So the leprous spirit, because to the consternation of all our medical practitioners, the New Testament with what I would call a bold and educated ignorance, refuses to acknowledge that there isn't a spiritual dimension to illness.

And it keeps confronting us with that possibility. That what our technological society can reduce to being merely a physical disorder has consistently, in the New Testament, been diagnosed as an underlying spiritual disorder.

[12 : 25] That it is a manifestation of that. I know that that can be twisted and corrupted into all sorts of terrible things. But I don't think it's a bad idea that when you're dealing with a person, you recognize not only the physical or mental symptoms, but you also recognize the spiritual battle that's involved there as well.

So Jesus dealt with that. And interestingly enough, his authority, which he demonstrated, was such that the leprous spirit left the man clean.

And then the story goes on. The story goes on by him addressing the man himself now. And when he addresses the man himself, he says, now here are your instructions.

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 the people.

Well, the man who had seen the spirit obey Christ himself did not obey Christ. And that's why I call this the miracle that failed.

[13:48] The purpose of a miracle, you see, is to establish beyond any shadow of doubt the authority of the person of Jesus Christ. And this miracle failed to establish that authority in the mind of the man who had been the recipient of the miracle.

And a whole lot of our current religion sort of hangs on that knife edge. We want the miracle, we don't want the obedience that is to follow it.

And that's, we separate the two out. We think our religion has to do with miracles, and the New Testament consistently says that it hasn't.

That miracles have to do with the person and authority of Jesus Christ. and they are signs to point you to him in order that you will hear and obey him.

And I think it's fully recognized in the New Testament how dangerous miracles are because they're so distracting and because they can so easily distort our understanding of the purpose of God in Jesus Christ.

[15:16] And so the man who, on whom the miracle had been performed, responded by disobeying Christ's implicit command. Well, he decided what should happen.

And of course, I'm in the religion business. and the great rule is get the word out. And make sure that as many people here as possible.

Whatever way you do, get it out. And that maybe satisfies our pride and satisfies our ambitions and satisfies our ecclesiastical goals.

But it doesn't represent obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord. And that's what we have to do. It was a very elaborate ceremony that you can read about in Leviticus chapter 14.

And I won't go into the details of it. You can boggle your own mind by reading Leviticus 14 and seeing all that was involved.

[16:27] But having told him to do it, the man didn't do it. Now, it's at this point that I want to tell you something about the gospel according to St. Mark.

You have a miracle that has been performed. It's been performed by Jesus Christ who in performing it demonstrates his authority and his power. And then you have the man being cleansed and the man who was cleansed disobeying the explicit command of Jesus Christ, not being prepared to go on in the obedience of faith in Christ.

Let me tell you something that makes this different for you than it was for the leper. You've read the end of the story.

You know how it is. I just read the tale of two cities and I won't tell you how it ends though perhaps most of you know but it's a very surprising ending indeed.

And reading the story would be very different if I'd known all along what the ending was but I didn't know because I didn't read the end of the story. But Mark knows that he's writing a gospel to the people who know the end of the story.

[17:48] They know that this Jesus ended up crucified. And so for them it is possible to see this miracle in a quite different way.

It's not difficult to imagine that you with your leprosy or whatever it may be are going to the man who is hanging on the cross and saying cleanse me.

And you perhaps in that situation could hear the response from the man on the cross who says my business is primarily to do the will of him who sent me.

And I am doing that in that I am here on the cross. I am seeking to do his will. And if you want to, you should take up your cross too.

Because that's where you will find his will. Leviticus 13 is full of pictures of the cross, of the shedding of blood, of atonement, of restoration and renewal and new life, full of Old Testament pictures that symbolize these things.

[19 : 23] things. And so when we go to Christ and cry out for a miracle, we are going to the man who knew that all the miracles do and all they're intended to do is to establish his authority so that we will come into the place of obedience to him.

The great work of Christ is on the cross. It's the miracle that failed, you see, because the leper failed to see that the great work of Christ was not healing him of his leprosy but something infinitely more.

And you know who the opposition to Christ was from when he was nailed to the cross? It was from the priests. They were the ones that were threatened by him, and they were the ones to whom the leper was commanded to go.

Healings of leprosy are famous in the New Testament for not happening. Remember, Christ was taken out and stoned when he pointed that out to them and said there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Naaman, of whom we read this morning, and none of them were healed, but that foreigner was healed, Naaman.

And the people were so indignant with that, they took Christ out to put him to death. Well, you see, that's what's happening here, is that the miracle fails if it fails to bring us into a place of obedience to Jesus Christ.

[21 : 08] the purpose of the story, you see, is to help you to know who Jesus is.

And the deceptive part of the story is to tell you about a miracle. And to tell you or me about a miracle is to say to us, I mean, our response is, I'd like one of those, please.

And these are the circumstances. But what it is, is to allow you to remember the end of the story.

And that what Christ came to do was infinitely more than a series of private miracles.

What he came to do was to heal us all from that leprosy which afflicts us and which at a very deep level in our lives makes us feel outcasts and alienated from the God who has created us and the God who calls us to belong to him.

And that God who is able to touch us and to make us clean and acceptable in the eyes of the Father. That's what the story is about.

[22 : 34] that's why the leper cries out, if you will, you can make me clean.

Christ says to him, I will. And when he says that, he touches him and himself becomes ceremonially unclean for having touched a leper.

and when Christ touches you to bring life to you, he dies.

And that's his great work, you see, to give you life, to give you and me life. And that's what he wants to do.

and he wants that kind of obedience from us, that we will do what he wants us to do. See, the result of what he did for this leper was that he could no longer go to the very place it was his intention to go, because we read a few verses previously that he went to all the towns in order to do the thing that he was called to do, to preach the news of the kingdom.

[23 : 58] But he was stopped from doing that by the enthusiasm of the man whom he had healed of leprosy. And often we, in our uninformed enthusiasm, stand in the way of the outworking of the purposes of God.

And we need to come again to a place of obedience. obedience. And I suppose that's really what our quiet days are for on Thursday and Friday and Saturday of this week, is that together in small groups or individually, we may come again to a place of obedience.

We may feel a deep sense of our own alienation, but we go to him who is outside the camp and we ask him who alone is able to, we ask him to make us clean.

Amen.