

I Will, Be Clean

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[0 : 0 0] All right, we are working our way through the Gospel of Mark, and you'll have to bear with my nasally sound today. Sorry about that. Here we are, end of Mark 1, our fourth week in this Gospel.

And we said on week one that when you look at the very beginning of Mark, it says the beginning of the Gospel, and that that can mean chronological order, but it also means something more than that.

In the Greek word that's there, it means the most important things to know about the Gospel. And every week, Mark has given us something that's very important to know about Jesus and about the Gospel that he came to bring.

Last week, we saw that it was that Jesus is attractive, and he's compelling because he has the authority to cast evil and death away. And that's why people wanted to follow him.

And this week, we carry on from that logic, and today, Mark is really putting a question before all of us in saying, followers of Jesus, if you're a Christian today, Christian friends, how do you approach Jesus, and how do you, and how should you?

[1 : 1 1] How do you search for him, and how do you approach him? And no matter really what you believe in today, the question underneath that question that Mark's presenting is something like, what are you looking for in life?

What are you searching for? What do you want? What is your greatest desire directed towards? And Mark is trying to say that even though you probably most of the time don't feel this way, it really is God.

That God really is the object of the search, even if most of the time you don't feel like it. All right, so we're going to see Mark tell us three things this morning. One is first the wrong way to seek after Jesus, and then what he actually came to give, and then finally the right way to approach him.

All right, so let's look at that together. You can look down in verse 35 and see the beginning of the wrong way to approach Jesus. Jesus is still in Capernaum like last week, and it's very early in the morning, and it's dark, and he wakes up before anybody else, and he goes out into a quote, desolate place to pray.

Literally the word is the wilderness. He goes back to the wilderness to pray. And we'll come back to that at the end, but Peter wakes up next and it says Simon here, Simon Peter, and he goes to seek Jesus.

[2 : 3 0] He doesn't know where he is, and so he goes and roams around with the other disciples and tries to find him. Now when he does, he tells him why, why is it that you're going to disturb Jesus while he's out in the wilderness praying?

And Peter says, I was searching for you because everyone else is searching for you. So in other words, he's saying everybody in Capernaum is early in the morning lined up waiting for you to come out, but you weren't there.

You had left. Now the question that Mark I think is implicitly opposing to us is why do you search for him? Why do you seek him? How do you seek him?

And here it is, Jesus says we're leaving. We're not going back. You know, Peter comes out and says everybody's lined up at Capernaum to see you, and Jesus says we're moving on.

We're not even going back to get our stuff. And so when everybody wants to come see him, he says I'm leaving. I'm going somewhere else. And he tells us, he says it's because I came to preach.

[3 : 3 2] Now when he says that, it gives us just a slight hint at what he's trying to suggest. And I think it's this. He's trying to say that the people who are lining up to see him came to him because they wanted his power, not his person.

You see, everybody in Capernaum had heard the previous day what he had done, how he had healed a lot of sick people. And so the next morning they are lining up at his door because they want to get in on those goods.

They want his benefits, but they don't want him. And so he says, we're leaving because I actually came to preach. I came to do something different than just distribute power.

That's not my first purpose. That's not the primary thing that I came to do. Now I think Mark, Mark is setting before every reader today, 2023, us modern readers, the same exact question.

And that's, do you want what Jesus offers more than you want him, more than you want his person? [4 : 39] And one way, how can you know? Well here's how you can know. One way, if you find yourself going very quiet in your relationship with God in really good seasons of your life, and then all of a sudden in the hard times and the bad seasons and the suffering, you run right back.

It may be the case that you want something that you've lost in that season of suffering rather than the Savior himself.

That you chase the benefits, not the person. And we can say, if that's you, if that's me, is it you? And you can say, you know, I want all these little things in life and when I don't get them, that's when I find I'm willing to pray.

And then you know that you're chasing benefits, not God himself. And Mark is saying, well here's what Mark's saying, imagine you're a young man here today, there's a few of you here, young men, and you've got, you know, that woman across the room has caught your eye.

And you know, you asked her out and it developed and then eventually it's come to the time. Some of you need to listen to this by the way. It comes to the time where it's time to ask her to marry you. [5 : 53] And your friend says, you say, you lay out the plan, I've got the ring, this is how I'm going to do it. And he says, but why do you want to marry her? And you say, you know what, married people get incredible tax breaks.

You know, it's so much better to be married because your taxes are lower, you know, you had to split the rent. I mean, I'm paying for a flat by myself, but if I get married, you've got two incomes, one rent.

Mark is saying that the right answer to the young man is what? I want to marry her because I want her, right? And in the same way, it's do you come to the living God because you want God? He's actually what's on offer, not first the benefits, the power. Now secondly, that leads us to see what Jesus came to give.

He says here, he differentiates the difference in his primary task and his secondary task by saying, I came to preach. The word, word preach there is literally the word herald.

[6 : 57] And it's a word that is adopted by Jesus in this very Greco-Roman context that was really used normally to proclaim a new message like victory in a battle or something like that. And he's saying, I came to herald to make an announcement is what he's saying.

Now the question is, what is it that he came to say? What is it that he came to say? And I think you get that in the story of the leper, even though it's subtle and you have to really look, but verse 40, all of a sudden he's left Capernaum and at some point as they're traveling through the desolate places, a leper approaches.

This leper in verse 40 is kneeling before Jesus. He's begging him. And it's important to know that this man would be completely isolated from any town or city.

He was intentionally left by himself as part of the law and he would have likely been covered in rags to cover up the sores on his body. And he's never supposed to approach another person.

And yet he approaches Jesus and he kneels before him and he begs him and he says, if you will, you can make me clean. Now what's going on here? Is this another instance where the people are lining up at the door again just wanting his power, just wanting to get out of bad circumstance free card.

[8 : 15] And that's not what's happening with the leper. And how do we know? It's because of what the leper says. The leper says, if you will, you can make me clean. He doesn't say if you want to, you can heal me.

He says, make me clean. And when he says the word clean, there's an immense amount of context and theological tradition buried, located in the depths of that word clean to be clean.

And it all comes from the Old Testament. Leviticus 14 lays out the laws about a leper being an unclean person unfit for God's presence and God's temple.

The fact that they had to be cast out, that they had to be outside the camp, that they had to live away from all people. And it wasn't primarily about the medical condition. There was something more going on.

They were unclean in a different way. Now what's going on with this strange idea? Leviticus 12 to 15 is where we have the laws of the uncleanness code laid out.

[9 : 14] But this is the place every year. It's the end of January, beginning of February. And if you're doing a Bible in a year plan, you're getting closer to Leviticus. And when you get to the uncleanness laws, this is where you stop and you move to the Gospels or something like that.

Because you say, this is so strange. It's so strange for a modern person to read about these laws. That if you're a leper, you have to live outside the city and be unclean. That if you give birth to a child, women have to leave the city and be part of the unclean.

That if you eat a certain type of animal, if you touch a dead carcass, all sorts of laws. And as modern people, we come to that and say, what in the world is happening here?

Now let me give you a couple proposals and then what I think is the right one. Sometimes people come and say, why is a leper unclean, unfit to be part of the city where God's people dwell?

And sometimes people will say, well, it's because of hygiene. It's a skin condition. It's contagious. But that doesn't actually work. Yes, that's true. There's a benefit there.

[10 : 19] But that's not the reason because, well, a woman who gives birth to a child becomes unclean. And that's not contagious. Instead, actually, leprosy in the rabbinic law has 72 different definitions in the inter-testamental laws that had developed.

And you can be a leper very temporarily. It's not always a lifelong condition. It actually usually isn't. So we think of leprosy today as Hansen's disease, a lifelong skin condition that's contagious, very dangerous, very painful, and you can't get rid of it.

And so you've got to be away from everybody. But actually, the way that the Bible describes it is something more like just having a fever blister, having an infected cut, having any skin condition that is infected and visibly damaged makes you unfit.

It makes you unclean. It makes you a leper. And so it can't be merely hygiene. But some people say, well, what it is is that you're unclean and you're punished by God when you commit a certain sin.

So a leper becomes a leper because he's sinned in a particular way in his life. And, oh, boy, the book of Job says otherwise, that that couldn't be farther from the case, that has nothing to do with it.

[11 : 27] Of course, it's not a sin to give birth to a baby. It's not a sin to be a leper. It's not a sin to eat even certain types of animals that that's not the point. It's not about personal sin that makes you clean or unclean.

That's not the point at all. Instead, it's something else. It's something else. And let me suggest that what God is doing here is he's taking things that we expect and things we don't expect, things that are simply taboo in the ancient Near Eastern culture and elevating them to make a point.

Let me give you an example. We say, man, this cleanliness thing is so strange. But we actually have this, too. We have cleanliness and unclean codes in the modern world as well and in all sorts of cultures.

Now, one of those that became very acute recently in 2020 was that when you are in the toilet and you come out, you better have washed your hands, not for 10 seconds, not for 12, not for 15, not for 17, but for 20 seconds.

The COVID rules that worldwide that the standard for washing your hands is 20 seconds minimum. Now, many of us might not have known that before COVID, but we learned in COVID that you got to do it for 20 seconds.

[12 : 41] And if you don't, you're unclean. I even heard a story recently of someone at school. I won't name who happened to be in my family that was sent back to the toilet because 20 seconds was not reached.

Too short. Have to go back, try again. These are cleanliness codes. They're there for good reason. It is about hygiene, but it is a regularly established fact that computer keyboards are much filthier than toilet seats.

But nobody washes their hands after using the computer. In other words, cleanliness, what's clean and unclean changes in different cultures. Different cultures have different standards of what's taboo, of what's unclean.

It can be about hygiene and that's important, but it also sometimes is about more than that. It's about culture. And what God does in the ancient areas is he takes something that's about culture, what was taboo, eating certain types of food, eating certain types of animals that was already present and he elevated it.

And what he did was said, this is actually going to be a symbol. And here's the symbol, here's the meaning. The uncleanness laws, the clean laws are about making something visible that reminds us that we are unfit for the presence of God.

[13 : 53] He chose things and said, don't do that because that's going to be a visible sign to remind you you are unfit to stand in the holy presence of God, amongst the people of God, in the city of God.

So if there was a visible skin condition, one of the things that a lot of the scholars will say is one of the things is any visible loss of life expressed in the loss of fluid.

Okay, so if you go through Leviticus, you're going to see a lot of cleanliness laws about fluids, human body stuff. And that's what's going to make you unclean.

Men and women, all types of situations. Well, the point was that these are visible losses of life, symbols. If blood comes out of you, you've lost part of what makes you alive.

And that was not because you've done something wrong, it was to be a sign. And so you had to go outside the camp and wait until the time was up where you could come back. And it was simply to say to you, you're not what you're supposed to be.

[14 : 55] Everybody look and understand you're not what you're supposed to be. This wasn't just for lepers. This was for everybody. Everybody at some point in their life becomes unclean. And so why in the world?

Childbirth? Childbirth makes you unclean? Well, it's not about giving birth to a baby. God loves babies. It was the visible sign of a loss of something. And even more, what's the other reason?

It's that there were certain cleanliness laws that were directly tied to the curse of Genesis 3 itself. See, what did God say? That childbearing would be cursed very specifically.

Pain, difficulty, labor. That intimacy has an uncleanness about it in the Levitical Law. Not because it's bad, but because God said men and women, marriage is cursed.

It's not what it should be. And so all these things exist as signs and symbols to say to every single person that experienced it, you are not fit to stand in the presence of God.

[15 : 53] That means that when this man comes and says, will you make me clean? You know what he's really asking? I want to be able to go and stand in the holy presence of God, and I can't.

I want to be able to go to the temple and offer my sacrifice and seek forgiveness before the Lord, where God dwells, but I cannot go. I want to be in his presence.

And that means when Jesus says, I can, I can make you clean, it's all about the primary thing he came to do. You see what he came to do? He didn't primarily come first to heal.

That's not the real issue. The real issue is he came to make people fit, to enter into the holy presence of the living God. He came to bring the presence of God to the people and to bring the people into the presence of God.

That's the primary thing that he's saying that he meant here. Now, it says in the text that Jesus felt compassion for this man. Actually, the manuscripts are split.

[16 : 53] This is an instance where we have a little bit of a debate, and it's important that you know it because some of the translations have a different word here. It says Jesus had compassion. Some translations are going to say Jesus was indignant or extremely angry.

Now, which is it? We don't know for sure, but the point doesn't change. You see, he's compassionate with the man, but he's indignant at the situation.

He hates what sin has caused. He hates the effects that sin has brought into the world to make people cast out from the presence of God, to put people in a position like this where they have to live in the wilderness and wrap themselves in cloth and can't be approached or approach anyone. He hates it. He has compassion on the man, but he hates the object of what sin has created. Here in the end, we've got a very clear point from Mark, and it's this.

One said it, Augustine made Mark's point, Mark makes Augustine's point 400 years prior, and this is that the human heart is restless until you find rest in God himself.

[18 : 04] Every single human heart is searching and desiring and wanting, and you find yourself over and over again empty in the things that you chase until you find rest in God himself.

You see, Jesus is saying, I came to give you God. I came to give you the presence of God above all, not the benefits first, not the healings, not the community, although they're great and we love it. But it's saying I actually came to give you the living God himself, that your heart is restless until you have him, because you were created for him and he's the one you were meant for. Now, Christian friends today, if you're a believer today, let me ask you, if you're like me, you hear that message and maybe you find yourself thinking right now, most of my Christian life has been coming for the benefits.

I don't know that I actually do want God. I don't know that the desire of my heart is to see the beauty of his face, as David prays in Psalm 27.

Maybe right now, and while we're all here together, that desire is a little elevated, and it is there right now, but we know what's going to happen to all of us probably 20 minutes after we leave, and we're going to want Candy Crush and Netflix and our dinner way more than we want God.

[19 : 31] And look, the Bible, this is the story of Scripture. You remember it? You remember the story of the Bible? We won't go through all of it.

But here's what happens. God shows up and he rescues people who didn't want to be rescued. He rescues people who did not want him, and then when he rescues them and he saves them and he even shows up face to face, they go out into the wilderness and said, boy, do I miss the wine and cheese that we had back in Egypt.

And then God comes himself into the middle of history in the world, and he stands over his people, Jesus Christ, and he says, oh, how I love these people. I want them. I've come for them.

I've come for them. I want compassion on them. I want to gather them together, and they shouted, crucify him. And understand that if today you feel like, boy, I don't know if I really desire God, and I don't know what that means for me, then understand that that's the entire story of the Bible is the God who comes for people who don't want him, and then after he comes for them and rescues them, they still don't.

And he saves them anyway. And here at the end of the passage, Jesus, right here at the middle of the story, Jesus does something as we close this point.

[20 : 48] He, well, you can imagine it. If you're Peter, if you're the disciples standing there, if you're a Jewish person standing there and the man comes up and he's grabbing Jesus' robe and he's touching Jesus and he's begging and saying, please, will you make me clean?

Simon Peter and everyone else there is going to say the same thing. It's not stated, but it's implicit. They're going to say, Jesus, do not touch him.

Get away from him. He's unclean. He's got leprosy. You could get it, but even more, even more, if you touch him, you will be unfit to enter the city of God, Jerusalem.

You'll be unfit to go into the temple. You'll be unfit to stand in the presence of your Father. You won't be allowed. You'll be unclean. You'll be cast out. You'll become the one in the wilderness.

You'll become the leper.

Jesus says, I will touch him, be clean. You see, it's not simply that Jesus has the power to make people clean.

[21 : 50] It's that the leprosy doesn't just disappear. Where does it go? It goes into him. He absorbs it. You see what he's saying when he touches him? He says, when he says, I will be clean, he's saying, I've come actually to become the leper.

I've come to be the one who would be cast out. I've come to be the one who would be isolated in the wilderness. I've come for a people, a humanity that when I show up and rescue them, they don't even want me.

And you see what he's saying, the extent of his love is that at the cross of Jesus Christ, Jesus says, I will do more than give you what you want. You don't know what you want.

You're chasing after all sorts of things in this life, all sorts of little desires that can never fulfill you.

And so I'll become the leper for you. I'll go, you know, the leper had to be exiled.

He had to stand outside the camp in the condition of symbolic death. Jesus Christ carried his cross out of the camp, out of the city of Jerusalem, away from the temple. And he was murdered by his own people.

[22 : 52] They didn't want him, but he said, I want you. I want you. I'm coming for you, even when you don't want me. And that's the extent of Jesus' love. Jesus is saying to every one of us today, for all the times you've not really wanted that what you were created to desire, he's saying, I will go and become the leper for you so that you might be clean, forgiven.

Now thirdly and finally, that means we have to just close by saying, would then is the right way to approach him. And this is just to say, we've got to respond. We've got to respond.

And two things here, and we'll close. Two ways to respond that are right here in the passage. The first is very obvious. It's very simple. You've already put it together. It is this.

We have to know. We have to believe in and know the one that we were really made for. And we have to set before ourselves regularly the true object of our greatest desires, which is God himself. We have to do that. Now here at the very end of the passage, verses 44 to 45, Jesus says to the leper, who's now clean, go tell the priest, go to Jerusalem, tell the priests.

[24 : 09] And that's because the priest is the public health official. The priest is the one who can say, officially, this person is clean. They don't have to be outside the camp. They can be part of the people of God.

They can come to the pilgrimage. They can come to the feast days. They can come to the temple. And what does the guy do? It says that he went out instead. He never went to the priest and he goes and spreads the word.

He goes and says, let me tell you about a man who just did this to me. Now a lot of people will come to this, a lot of preachers, a lot of commentators and say, this is exactly how you should never respond to God.

He comes and saves you. He comes and makes you clean. And then he says, now go live like this and you go and immediately disobey. Now I don't think that that's what this is about.

I am a minority. But I don't think that that's what this is about at all. I think Mark is saying that he didn't obey. Did he not obey? Of course, well, sure, in the most technical sense.

[25 : 07] But maybe something else is happening here. And I think it could be this. He realizes, you know, he goes on his way. He thinks about going to see the priest, but he realizes, I don't need to go to the temple.

I don't need to go to the priest. I don't need to pronounce publicly I'm clean because the priest and the temple came to me. You see, he's saying, if this is all about me being fit for the presence of God, he realizes, I don't have to go find God at the temple.

The living God has come to me. He stood before me. And so I can't do anything else but say, guys, the temple days are over. I think that's what he went and said.

He said, you know, he wanted to keep it quiet, but I can't keep it quiet. The temple days are over. God has come to me, which means Jesus Christ is the presence of God come to us.

Now that's to say, we've got to set before ourselves Jesus Christ every day as the true object of our desires. I think that's what we're being told here.

[26 : 16] Thomas Chalmers, the great father of the free church, the first moderator and really in some sense a founder of our denomination in the 19th century, he preached a very famous sermon.

Actually, we don't know if it was a sermon. It could have been a lecture called the explosive power of a new affection. Many of you know this one. But in it, he says, he was a scientist, a mathematician really, before a preacher.

And Chalmers says, he asked the question, what is the fastest way to get air out of a beaker? You know, in a laboratory? You got a beaker, it's full of air. What's the fastest way to get the air out of it? And he said, if you have every instrument available to you, every scientific instrument to create a vacuum, to get the air out, how would you do it? And Chalmers says, the fastest way is to pour water in it.

You know, and he says, in other words, the air in our heart. The air in our heart is that our desires are always bent the wrong direction. Christian, your desires continually are bent in the wrong directions.

[27 : 16] You chase after little things and you make them your God, you make them the true things that you think you want in life above all else. And it's like air in the midst of the beaker. And Chalmers is saying, the fastest way to get it out is not to try to discipline yourself, not to try to do all sorts of fancy things.

Instead, what is it? It's that you need the explosive power of a new affection, water, not air. You need a different substance.

You need something else in your heart rather than that which was there. And that something else is the living God. You've got to put God in your heart every day.

Now, secondly and finally, let me say more specifically how. And we get a quick example from Jesus here. Remember what he did, it does at the beginning.

He goes out early in the morning when it's still dark. He gets into solitude and he prays. And it's a simple practice, but I do think that his example is set before us here to say that we are called, we do need to get by ourselves every day and pray.

[28 : 24] And pray specifically that Jesus would be our greatest affection. To ask the Lord and say, will you make yourself better to me today than the little desires of my heart that I keep chasing after?

It is striking how often Jesus did this all across the gospels. He woke up early in the morning, he went to a desolate place and he prayed. And I think it's because as a human being, Jesus who was facing death, who was facing being cast outside the camp on the cross, I think he realized in the midst of all sorts of temptations that were coming at him, I need to be alone with the living God with my father and to hear the father say to me, his love is better than life itself.

If anybody needed to hear that, Jesus needed to know that the love of the father is better than even living than life itself. And as his face was set towards Jerusalem, that's what he needed from prayer. And if he needed it, we need it. We need it, just like he needed it. And so every day, his example, we need to pray and ask that God would change our affections.

We need to pray and say something like, you know, Lord, I need you today more than my phone and I need you today more than my Netflix tonight and I need you today more than money and I need you today more than success and I need you today even more than a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a relationship, I need you today more than everything and say, give me what I cannot desire on my own, you.

[30 : 07] And you can use the words of Psalm 27. David says, Lord, I long to desire the beauty of your face in the land of the living and make that your prayer every day.

I'll close with Hebrews 9:28. Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many will appear a second time not to deal with sin.

He already became the leper for us. Not to deal with sin, but the second time he will come to save those who are eagerly awaiting him.

Seek, go and seek God in your life. Go and seek him so that you can eagerly await him so that when he comes, he will gather you.

Let's pray together. Lord, we ask now as we approach the Lord's table that you would give us affection for you above all. That's what the table's about, that one day we will get to eat in front of you, with you, at the table with you in the land of the living, in the land of the resurrected.

[31 : 12] And so we do ask this morning to cast away our little hopes and dreams and not to get rid of the things that are good in this life, but to know that when we want you more than everything else, we get the world.

We get you, we get resurrection, we get the land of the living. And so expel our wrong desires, our little gods, and give us deep affection for the one who became the leper for us, but did not stay dead.

And we ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.