

November 7, 2010

# *Preach the Gospel: if Necessary, Use Rotting Flesh*

Mark 1:35-45

## INTRODUCTION

There is a famous statement of Francis of Assisi which advises us to “Preach the gospel at all times—if necessary, use words.” Its meaning is clear enough. Live a life that is so irrefutably Christ-like that people will be won over by your love and authenticity and so on. The facts that make up the gospel story are then the icing on the cake, so irresistible will be your gospel-lifestyle. So preach the gospel at all times—in all that you do—if necessary use words. But isn’t that a bit like saying, “Give that girl your phone number—if necessary use digits” or “Survive—if necessary breathe” or “Think—if necessary use your brain” or “Wash your hands—if necessary use soap” or “Be polite—if necessary use manners” or “Romance your wife—if necessary brush your teeth.” I hope you won’t be surprised by now if I told you that Jesus’ methodology was exactly the opposite of St. Francis. For Jesus, preaching the gospel with words is exactly why He was here: the miracles—they were signs of the substance of the gospel speech.

- GOSPEL PRIORITIZING
- GOSPEL CLEANSING

**The Big Idea** is that Jesus healed the leper’s skin as a sign of how He heals our leprous hearts.

## DOCTRINE

### I. GOSPEL PRIORITIZING

#### A) The Priority of Prayer

1. I think we can get a lot from the time and the place that Jesus prayed: *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* (35). Now do you remember the day that Jesus just had? First the showdown with the demon; then He rebukes a fever; then the whole city shows up at the front door and keeps him up all night taking care of everyone. And the fact that *Simon and those who were with him searched for him* (36), indicates that they probably slept in while Jesus slipped out. The day before was the Sabbath—for us that would be Sunday—and the Christian who wants to have a God-glorifying week had better make it a point to drive the word down deep from the Sabbath when the daily grind starts to call: “early will I seek you” [Ps. 63:1]. Study after study confirms that human beings tend to remember first and last things in any set better than we remember everything in between, so to seek God earnestly is the same thing as to seek him early and first. You can hardly have one without the other. Also important, Jesus removed himself from the distraction of others and the distraction of stuff and there He prayed. This is why the morning is such a good time for the discipline of prayer.

2. In this act of prayer, Jesus gives us **gospel** and He gives us an **example**. But try the gospel on for size before trying to walk in his shoes! The text says that on Sunday morning, Jesus rose, departed, went to be with the Father in order to pray—does any of that sound familiar? The resurrection, ascension and intercession of Christ are a big part of the good news! Because Jesus goes before the Father *before* us, therefore we can go to the Father. I said look at the gospel here before trying to imitate Jesus: so the reason we can pray with confidence and expectancy is because someone like Jesus did first. The author of Hebrews gives us the theology of it:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession...Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need [Heb. 4:14, 16].

3. I think it is always good to study the simple every-day reactions of the disciples to Jesus doing and saying things that they would never have done or said. So, for example, once they found him they *said to him*, “*Everyone is looking for you*” (37b). Now who is ‘everyone’ here? Well since it says “they,” meaning all of the four disciples, it must mean that this refers to the crowds of sick and oppressed people. At any rate, the exasperated statement tells us that it didn’t make any sense for Jesus to be off on his own when business was going so well. It also seems to indicate that the disciples and the people of the town both had one thing in common—they felt that Jesus should get back to improving people’s physical conditions.

## B) The Priority of Preaching

1. When *we* are obsessed with numbers or with what seems to be working according to the most amount of people, the Lord would tell us that it's time to move on to harder work. *And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons (39)*. I believe that verse 39 is included as a summary statement to prevent any reader from flying to one extreme or the other: Jesus' ministry was both holistic and hierarchical (PP). In other words, the ministry of Jesus was **cerebral** (addressing the eternal need with new bigger things to think about) and **experiential** (addressing the everyday needs), so real ministry is holistic; but on the other hand the order matters. There's a hierarchy. The cerebral precedes the experiential because truth comes before application.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth [Jn. 17:17].

In other words, Jesus knew, when He prayed for you and me, that everything else good that happens in the Christian life—everything that God does to you to change you, to use you, all of it—happens in the context of truth transforming your mind.

2. So what was this thing that Jesus said He is here to do? *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" (38)*. To **preach** (*kerygma*) means to declare with authority. Preaching is not simply teaching. Preaching is not conversation or dialogue. Preaching is not skits or dramas. Preaching is not optional: "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" [1 Cor. 1:21]. Preaching is the means that God chose to turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. It's why Jesus had a three-year ministry leading up to the cross.

For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice [Jn. 18:37].

So Jesus delights in preaching because He delights in truth. He spent his three years on earth using words to point to and clarify his work. He expects his people to do the same. Let me get a little deeper: Even though Jesus commissions others who would speak of his work just as He speaks of his work, He would not leave his work to be *interpreted* by others. He told you (with words) *what* He must do and *why* you need it. And so you and I have nothing to do that is clearer than to use words to describe his work. But I hear a commotion today. You and I can see a revolt against words. People say that talk is cheap. But that really all depends on who you're talking to. What if the one who you're talking to is talking about how He laid down his life for yours, even though He deserved nothing but praise, and you deserve nothing but damnation? Is talk still cheap?

## II. GOSPEL CLEANSING

### A) The Leper's Approach to Jesus

1. First of all he was a leper (λεπρος). And a leper was not just physically unclean; he was ceremonial unclean. Remember the people of Israel were created as a people wherein God would dwell in purity. The leper was a sign of the fact that the impure could not dwell with purity. The leper was obligated to yell out "Unclean!" "Unclean!" when anyone got too close to him. If this Jesus was so connected to the God who wrote that Law of purity, then it was not obvious to this man that Jesus would even want to heal him. He was a walking disease. His whole life, his whole identity was now filthy, disgusting, cursed, hopeless, horrifying to look upon, abandoned by God, good for nothing. But as vivid as the picture is, we need to remember that it is still a sign of a deeper festering problem:

There is no soundness in my flesh **because of your indignation**; there is no health in my bones **because of my sin** [Ps. 38:3].

Do you hear what the Psalmist is saying? My flesh is decaying *because* of your judgment, O God, against my treason! My bones are rotting to the core *because* I have sinned against you Lord! Sin separates us from God and that is the poison that causes all other problems. You want another mission-statement of Jesus? "He has sent me to bind up the broken**hearted**" [Is. 61:1].

2. Second he implored Jesus for a touch. And Jesus rewards this kind of persistency: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" [Mat. 7:7], "whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" [Heb. 11:6]. This man's approach is a picture of God-pleasing faith.

3. Third he bowed himself to the ground. Notice that this completes the act of worship. Since lepers were seen as identical to corpses in the Law, so to heal the leper was equal to raising the dead. The leper acknowledges this divine power; and Christ accepts this worship. God is *most* glorified when we come to him to be helped with the biggest problems; God is *less* glorified when we come to him only for temporary fixes; and God is *least* glorified of all when we don't believe him for any of it!

4. Finally what he said confesses the power of Christ without presuming on his will: "*If you will, you can make me clean*" (40b). God can take away any one of your sinful tendencies right

now. God can give anyone a new heart that follows after him right now. If God is not lacking in any power, and the real question is—Why? Why would you take me in and cleanse me, so that all that is left is, O God, please do!—then where is our fear and awe and wonder at his will when we talk about these things?

### B) Jesus' Approach to the Leper

1. Jesus—God in the flesh—was *Moved with pity (41a)*. Wherever we see Jesus and a contrite sinner in the same scene we see Jesus yearning to reach out and touch and heal. There's no exception: "whoever comes to me I will never cast out" [Jn. 6:37].
2. Next, Jesus "broke the law" (not really!) in that He touched a leper: *he stretched out his hand and touched him (41b)*. By touching this man He shows us that there is no depth of impurity which can withstand the purest of the pure! No sin is so filthy that the light of Christ cannot instantly overcome it and cause it to evaporate! And remember that the people of God are compared in Scripture to a dirty prostitute and, in the end, a spotless bride. At first it looks like a scandal, it looks like an impossibility, it looks like it would be an embarrassment to take this charred-to-the-bone walking corpse for his bride, but He says to this abominable flesh: You are "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" [Gen. 2:23].
3. From the compassionate will of God comes the saving decree of God: "*I will; be clean*" (41c). "I will" means just what it sounds like—Yes, I want to make you whole!

One of the most obvious aspects of the Gospel narratives is the other-worldly power of Christ breaking through his humanity. And one mistake we can make is to get the idea that the compassion of Christ that is the only thing that is on center stage, so his humanity. But it is also the divinity of Christ that shows forth in this supernatural power! This is absolutely vital to argue for in our day. The Gospel narratives are used today by the emerging church as a springboard for our own mission: to do that which the humanity of Christ has done. He was human; we're human. He was sent on mission; we're on the same mission. Of course it's always easier stuff for us than to, say, perform a *bona fide* miracle, much less to atone for the sins of the world. And so we are fooling ourselves in a way similar to Gandhi and Schweitzer and others for whom Jesus is the great Humanitarian, the great Liberal, the great Communist!

4. From the saving decree of God comes immediate, total cleansing. It says, *And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean (42)*. He heals him by the simple power of his word:

BE CLEAN! And as simple as that, he was. “He sent out his word and healed them” [Ps. 107:20]. But since this healing tells the story of how Jesus cleanses the leprosy from our souls, what exactly does this saving word do? Well Paul describes Jesus the bridegroom “having cleansed (his bride) by the washing of water with the word” [Eph. 5:26], and Jesus says to his disciples: “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you” [Jn. 15:3]. He was **made clean** so that God is being the Creator here. And here we can see yet another reason why words have a priority over works. Think about it—when you and I do feed, heal, comfort, love, serve (and we should!)—what exactly distinguishes to the unbeliever the difference between our gospel and the other unbelievers who are doing the same thing? What tells the sick sinner that he needs more than the bowl of soup or the hand on the shoulder—will the bowl of soup tell him? Jesus wasn’t a mime! He was the Word that became flesh and He used words at every point to tell us what He was up to with his actions. Now why does all this matter so much? No one in modern times has said it so concisely as J. Gresham Machen in his 1923 defense of the true gospel entitled *Christianity and Liberalism*. We could learn something from him:

There is a profound difference, then, in the attitude assumed by modern liberalism and by Christianity toward Jesus the Lord. Liberalism regards Him as an Example and Guide; Christianity as a Savior: Liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith.<sup>1</sup>

This is exactly the difference today. Listen carefully to people when they talk about being “on mission” and pit that against doctrine and preaching and words. These are the assumptions behind it—that Jesus is an example for something we can do, that the gospel of Christ redeeming individuals *as* individual sinners is outdated and self-centered! Listen!

### C) The Christian’s Approach to the Skeptic

1. *Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once (43)* – indicating that whatever is to be drawn out of Jesus’ motive, it is at least important. It was stern and it was decisive.
2. So is there anything we can say about this careful command? *See that you say nothing to anyone (44a)*. Perhaps what is on display is the humility of Christ as He would not make a fuss about himself. This is interesting because in his teaching Jesus draws attention to himself. But there is a worldly and a heavenly way to handle accolades. Isaiah prophesied that “He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street” [Is. 42:2]. But

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1923); pp. 95-96

the reference to the Law gives us a hint: *but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them (44b)*. This wasn't a "proof" in order to satisfy the scribes and priests there. This was a proof as it was called for by the Law—it is 'what Moses commanded,' namely that the cleansed leper goes to the priest:

This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest [Lev. 14:2],

Take care, in a case of leprous disease, to be very careful to do according to all that the Levitical priests shall direct you. As I commanded them, so you shall be careful to do [Deut. 24:8].

3. Just as the 'Messianic Secret' we talked about in the last text when Jesus does not permit the demons to speak, so He prevents miraculous signs and the physical provision for people's needs to be the motive for people to follow him. There is no following Jesus without walking in the same direction as Jesus is walking (that's what following means); and Jesus is going *with words to* the cross. Walking in some different way is what is being protected against.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." [Jn. 6:26-29]

4. I do not personally know what to make out of how the man acted after he was healed. We could balance things out by saying that he was disobedient but appropriately affected. So that he gets an A for zeal in evangelism but an F for following orders! But the text does not really allow for too much speculation. The most reasonable guess seems to be that the man was going against the order of Jesus' ministry, as evidenced by the fact that *Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places (45b)*. However, the emphasis seems to be on Jesus' instruction and motive—not on how this man lived up to it.

## APPLICATION

**To the Skeptic** – Anyone who is not a Christian will naturally not accept the doctrine of total depravity. If you are in that place then you may suspect that what the Bible says about

sin is an exaggeration at best. Perhaps we are not perfect, but we cannot be on the inside what this man was on the outside. Well I'm not quite sure what you mean if you're a naturalist since if nature is all there is, then there is nothing on the inside but blood and guts!

The twentieth century British author Malcolm Muggeridge, when he was still a young journalist in India recalls swimming in the river early in the morning when he noticed that all alone on the shore was a young Indian woman bathing. This was in the days when England was a colonial power there and any Indian woman would be either honored or pressured to accommodate any British man who wanted to take advantage of her—at least that is what he was thinking. And so he swam to her, his heart racing, all the way hearing the voice of his conscience saying No! No! but swimming all the more rapidly underwater to drown out the sound, and then as he got right up to her, emerging from the water, he suddenly realized that there he was, face to face with a leper. “What a lecherous woman!” the words of self-righteous dehumanizing pride came out, when suddenly an even more clear impression struck him like a freight train, “What a lecherous heart I have!”

Do you not get the sense sometimes that you have looked at others with the heart of leper? And while you are busy ridding the social body of all of its spots and warts, what do you do with the spots and warts in your own heart?

**To the Saint** – So ‘Preach the gospel with your whole mission, your whole life—if necessary, use words?’ As always a half-truth masquerading as a whole truth equals an untruth. *Words are not just necessary; words are where the power is.* I know that runs contrary to everything you have ever been taught—Talk is cheap! Put up or shut up! He’s all talk! Walk the talk! People don’t care that you know until they know that you care! A little less talk and a lot more action! Eventually you’ve got to put away the driver’s manual and get behind the wheel! Deeds, not creeds! You hear this seemingly profound, seemingly more serious sloganeering everywhere. Words, words, words—they’re just words. But if it’s the right word, it makes you whole, and you won’t do *nothing*—you won’t be able to shut up and sit down (like this man). This will be the battle in the next generation of the church. A gospel of social action, social feeling, social-ism versus a gospel where the Word did it all and our words talk about Him doing it all.

We have all become 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 [Is. 64:6]

What I have to say to every hip young church planter who stares at me as if I'm a strange bird, who can't understand why we're not "on mission" because we're too busy "having meetings" and "listening to some guy in the front 'talk,'" is simply that we're not good enough to be on your mission! I've tried. I've tried to change the world and every time I lift a finger, it falls off. Every time I pray, my knees crumble. Every time I look inside to see if there's anything that God can use everything falls apart, like a leper. Maybe I just need a stronger gospel than you, because I'm just that diseased. But I've got a hunch from the Bible that you need the same thing.

**To the Sinner** – Our hearts aren't "just like" this man's rotting flesh. Our hearts are much, much worse. Listen to these two passages in the prophet Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" [Jer. 17:9] and then he asks, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil. I will scatter you like chaff driven by the wind from the desert" [Jer. 13:23-24]. So is your heart just like the leper's skin? No. It is far worse. The leper is a faint analogy, but it's a good one.

## CONCLUSION

There are many parts of our sin that ought to trouble us. But there is one thing about your sin and mine that I think we can all relate to if we just think about it. And that is shame.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me [Ps. 51:7, 10].

Now what are you most ashamed of? What parts of you can you not even offer to God for cleansing because they are "too dirty" and your limbs would crumble if you even tried? In the Lord's Supper, Jesus shows us with a crumbly, easily breakable substance what He became for us—"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" [Rom. 8:3]. Every time a sinner reaches out his flesh or her flesh toward God it crumbles to pieces. We need someone made of flesh to stand in our place under the Law and to stand in our place under the judgment of that Law. Our hearts are leprous. We need One who is willing and able so that our only plea to him is 'Lord if you are willing you can make me clean,' and what God's word says to us today is that every time He will say: *I am willing, be clean.*