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Sermon Summary #31

Persistent Prayer and the Healing Power of God Mark 7:31-37; 10:46-52; Luke 18:1-8

I consider it nothing short of providential that nine men from the church joined me in Minneapolis this past week for a conference on prayer. The reason I see the hand of God in this so clearly is that my plan all along in our progression through Mark was that I would preach from these two stories about divine healing. After attending the conference and being challenged in so many ways, I decided that our focus should also include Luke 18 and the amazing parable of this remarkable widow woman and the unjust judge from whom she sought an answer to her request.

So, here is what I want us to do today. I think you'll find it different, but I am very hopeful and confident that you will find it encouraging and helpful. I want us to look briefly at these two episodes of healing in Mark. I'm only going to make some short observations and then I want us to concentrate on Luke 18. My plan is to finish earlier than normal and devote the remainder of our time to praying for the sick, all the sick, here at Bridgeway today.

Mark 7:31-37

So let's get started with just a few words about the healing of this man in Mark 7 who was both deaf and mute.

(1) The fact that Jesus pulls aside this anonymous man is proof once more of the compassion and love that Jesus has for people, especially those who are convinced that because of some failure or disability they are of no value to anyone. Jesus doesn't view him as a problem or a nuisance or even as just one more face in the crowd. He singles him out and pulls him aside privately.

(2) You may find this a bit odd, but I love it when people try to dismiss or reject the work of the Holy Spirit because of what they believe are weird incidents and unusual behavior. Folks, it doesn't get any more weird or bizarre than right here! Jesus sticks his fingers into his ears! And as if that weren't enough, he spits on his own fingers and then touches the man's tongue!

Rule: never, ever measure the validity of what the Holy Spirit does by whether or not it is weird or strange or out of the ordinary. In another place Jesus spit in the dirt and made little mud balls and put them on a blind man's eyes and healed him. By 21st century, sophisticated middle class American standards of what is culturally acceptable, Jesus is weird. But again: biblical truth and spiritual reality are never to be judged by "21st century, sophisticated middle class American standards of what is culturally acceptable."

(3) The fact that the people beg Jesus to lay his hand on the man (v. 32) and that Jesus puts his fingers in his ears and touches his tongue all point once again to the importance of physical touch as a means by which God has chosen to impart the healing power of his Holy Spirit.

This man undoubtedly felt like a complete social outcast, a reject, an embarrassment to others because he couldn't hear or speak. No one paid him any attention. People saw him coming and turned and walked away in the other direction. Not Jesus! If nothing else, these expressions of physical touch were a sign of love and acceptance and affirmation.

(4) But why "spit"? Among the Jews of that day and time the spit of certain persons was considered to have healing power, especially when it was applied to the area of sickness or injury, and accompanied by prayer.

(5) Literally, it says that "the chain of his tongue was broken," indicating that this was a supreme act of liberation in setting this man free from the bonds of his affliction.

Mark 10:46-52

Several things should also be said about the healing of blind Bartimaeus, who, by the way, is the only person in the Synoptic Gospels whose name is ever given.

(1) As with the deaf-mute in Mark 7, so also here with Bartimaeus, he is marginalized from the world around him. He sits on the “sidelines,” as it were: “by” or “beside” the roadside. No one paid him any attention. He didn’t matter to anyone, except to Jesus.

(2) But note also that when the story ends he is no longer “beside” the road, sitting alone, but is “on the road/way” (v. 52) following Jesus as his disciple.

(3) As James Edwards has said, “What Bartimaeus lacks in eyesight he makes up for in insight.” There is an attitude of expectancy on his part as Jesus the Nazarene passes his way. He cries out to Jesus for mercy and everyone tells him to shut up. “Be quiet! You’re embarrassing us. You’re making us feel uncomfortable!” But Bartimaeus refused to shut up. Nothing can silence him, least of all the offended feelings of people who before now never paid him any attention at all.

(4) The text literally says, “And Jesus stood (still).” What stopped Jesus in his tracks wasn’t a powerful or influential religious leader or a military commander of Rome. What stopped him was a poor and pitiful blind man crying for mercy. That’s Jesus for you!

(5) Why does Jesus ask him, “What do you want me to do for you?” My goodness, isn’t it obvious? I suspect that there’s something important here: it makes a difference when we articulate our need to Jesus; when he hears us speak forth our desperation for his touch and power.

(6) The word translated “made you well” is *sozo* and means “to be saved.” It refers to both physical and spiritual restoration. The fact that Bartimaeus immediately follows Jesus as a disciple indicates that what occurred was more than physical, it was also spiritual.

(7) Finally, Jesus explicitly attributes his healing to his “faith” (v. 52). What was the nature of his faith? Several things: He knew Jesus was the Messiah (“Son of David”); he knew that he was deserving of nothing, not even healing, but only of judgment (“have mercy on me”); and he was confident that Jesus wouldn’t leave him in his condition as seen by the persistence and disregard for public opinion.

Luke 18:1-8

The persistent, relentless faith of Bartimaeus is a perfect introduction to the story we now turn to in Luke 18.

Some of the parables are hard to understand, but not this one. Its meaning is stated clearly right up front by our Lord: The purpose of the parable is to encourage them “always to pray” and never to “lose heart.” How easy it is for us to give up when our prayers aren’t immediately answered in the way we think they should be: we get discouraged, we lose our enthusiasm, we begin to doubt God, we see no reason ever to pray again, etc.

The two people in this parable couldn’t have been more different. They were at opposite ends of the social, political, economic, and spiritual spectrum.

Let’s look first at this **judge**.

What a way to be remembered! The only two things that stand out about him are that ***he doesn’t fear God and he couldn’t care less about other people!***

He doesn’t fear God. He has no sense of obligation to a higher power than himself. He is much like the judges to whom Jehoshaphat spoke in **2 Chron. 19:6-7**

This judge had no shame. His conscience was dull and hardened and insensitive. Don’t even think about appealing to his sense of honor: he has none. Here is a woman whose request ought to make him feel ashamed, and he feels nothing! You could point a finger in his face and shout, “Shame on you,” and it would have no effect whatsoever.

Jesus highlights this man’s wretchedness and selfishness in order to drive home the improbability, perhaps even the impossibility, of anyone ever receiving a fair and equitable hearing in his court, least of all this helpless widow.

She couldn’t appeal to him “for God’s sake” because he couldn’t care less about God! “Don’t appeal to God in my courtroom. I couldn’t give two hoots and a holler about him! God smod!”

Now let's look at the **widow**.

Along with the orphan, the widow is typically portrayed in the Bible as representative or the embodiment of utter powerlessness, dependency, helplessness, and vulnerability. She has no one to help her but God.

Her legal rights were being violated. Perhaps not unlike today where unscrupulous scam artists prey upon the elderly and undiscerning, she has no friends, no family, and evidently can't afford legal counsel.

The judge looks upon her and the condition she's in and *feels nothing*. She's obviously not visibly impressive. The judge immediately figures out that there's little if any monetary gain to be found in granting her request. Perhaps the person who is oppressing or taking advantage of her has already bribed the judge. In any case, she is of no use or profit to him and he can hardly be bothered by someone so insignificant.

Here's the stunning thing: the judge doesn't argue with this criticism of his character! When people attack us or undermine our character or question our motives, we get defensive; we fight back; we throw a fit! Not this judge. He agrees with everything Jesus said about him!

“ . . . he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man’ . . .” (v. 4b).

He made no bones of the fact that he's a jerk. He admits it! He's not in the least embarrassed or ashamed that he's a cold-hearted buffoon or that people know it!

This confession he makes in v. 4 proves that his character never changes. In other words, when he eventually relents and gives the woman what she asks it isn't because he suddenly came to his senses and felt conviction deep in his heart. Nothing like: “I've been such a jerk. How could I have been so cold and calloused? I repent!” NO! He's just as much a shameless and defiant man at the end of the story as he was at the beginning.

The judge concedes that there's only one reason why he finally gives in and grants her request. READ v. 5 . . .

Some have pointed out that the word translated “beat me down” in other contexts means “to blacken the eye.” It refers to getting punched in the face! But I don't think he actually feared she would take him down and beat the you-know-what out of him. And it certainly doesn't mean that he feared she might ruin his reputation, because he couldn't care less what other people thought about him.

Why did he give in? Because she was persistent! It was not out of concern for her but for himself that he finally yielded.

“This woman is going to wear me out. She's never going to shut up. I'm going to have to put up with her every day for the rest of my life. OK, OK, enough's enough. I'll grant your request.”

Now here's the point for you and me. There are two contrasts in this parable that must be seen:

The contrast is between an evil and selfish judge and a good and gracious God.
The contrast is also between a helpless and hopeless widow and God's elect children.

Jesus then argues from the lesser to the greater. Here's his point:

God is **not** like the judge . . .
You and I are **not** like the widow . . .

Unlike the judge, God is good and generous and quick to provide assistance. Unlike the widow, we are not anonymous and alone but the very chosen children of God, members of his kingdom.

Therefore, if she through her persistence obtained from the judge what she desired, how much more shall we, through our persistence, receive from God what we ask!

Let me say it again:

If a wicked and shameless judge grants the request of a helpless and hopeless widow, how much more shall a gracious and loving Father grant the request of his precious and forgiven child!

Today, our concern is with asking God for physical healing. The point of the parable, says Jesus, is to

encourage us all to continue to pray, to always pray, and never to give up or become disheartened or discouraged.

Never think for a moment that God is like this judge! No! He is the utter and absolute antithesis of the judge. He is kind and giving and tender-hearted and generous and loves to bless his children when they come to him with their needs.

So let's come to God with our needs . . .

Note: a word about the importance of maintaining a healthy and biblical balance between **asking boldly** and **surrendering completely** . . . Some of you camp out in one of those to the exclusion of the other.

“But Sam, what if we pray today and no one is healed?” I wonder if that widow asked herself that question after the first time she came to the judge and he said No? If God does not heal today there is only one biblical response: Humble yourself before the Lord, gird up your loins, and come back again and ask and pray and seek his mercy and never, ever give up!