



“When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” (Mark 2:5).

Priority in Service

Central Truth: Ministry to spiritual needs is the most important work of the Christian.

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Topic: Christ: Ministry of; Service.

What is the most important issue to be faced in the life of a Christian? What among the many needs should be given the first place in the concern of a committed Christian? Jesus faced that problem. His example puts things in proper perspective for Christians in every age and under every circumstance.

The time was late A.D. 27 or early A.D. 28. Jesus was busily involved in His great Galilean ministry. Important things had happened in His life thus far. He had been baptized in water by John the Baptist. He had been anointed by the Father with the Holy Spirit. He had performed several miracles. He had returned to His hometown of Nazareth and had been rejected. He had called four of His future apostles (Peter and Andrew, James and John). Miracles of healings and exercising demons had brought such interest in Him that He found it difficult to appear in the cities because of the great crowds which gathered about Him. Jesus concluded His first tour of Galilee (commonly called His “Galilean ministry”). With Peter, Andrew, James, and John, he returned to Capernaum when the events recorded in Mark 2 transpired.

Consider the situation which faced Jesus. (1) He was physically tired and needed rest after His long trip. (2) A great crowd filled the house where He was and overflowed in the yard outside, packing around doors and windows. (3) A poor palsied man was before Him and needed physical healing. (4) Expectant friends of the palsied man, having gone to such

extreme effort to get their needy friend to Jesus, should be rewarded by seeing their desire fulfilled. (5) Critics were nearby to observe, criticize, and condemn Jesus if He did not meet their expectations. (6) The crippled man bore a burden of guilt which needed forgiving.

To which situation would Jesus respond first? His response indicated a great truth: ministry to spiritual need is of first importance in serving God. Today's lesson seeks to impress that truth on your mind. That is why it is entitled "Priority in Service."

I. MORE IMPORTANT THAN PHYSICAL REST **(Mark 2:1, 2)**

Jesus moved always under a sense of divine commission. He called four disciples and said to them, "*Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth*" (Mark 1:38). They followed Him as He walked throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23). The trip must have been very exhausting to their physical strength. Besides the physical exertion were the spiritual demands of His ministry.

Finally, Jesus returned to Capernaum. The house into which He entered was probably the home of Simon Peter (Mark 1:29). He had visited there before. The seclusion of a private home would give Him and His disciples an opportunity to rest from the press of the ever present crowds which had thronged them before (Mark 1:45). It was not to be so. Capernaum provided no opportunity to rest.

A crowd gathered about the house because word was circulated that Jesus was there. Many of the common citizens of Capernaum were present. Even "important" people, like the doctors of the law from Jerusalem, were present to hear Him (Luke 5:17). Jesus could not pass up such an opportunity, "*and he preached the word unto them*" (Mark 2:2).

Jesus was tired, but not too tired to serve the spiritual needs of other people. What a lesson for Christians who get "too tired" for Bible study, prayer, church attendance, visitation, and other areas of spiritual ministry. Jesus taught that personal rest is less important than spiritual ministry.

II. MORE IMPORTANT THAN PHYSICAL HEALING **(Mark 2:3-12)**

Thank God for people who are concerned about the needs of other people. Mark 2 tells of four friends who were so concerned about the

physical illness of their mutual friend, and so confident that Jesus could heal him if He saw him, that they resolved to get their friend to Jesus. They went to the sick man's house, placed him on a stretcher, took hold of one corner of the stretcher, and carried him to the house where Jesus was residing. It was not easy, but it was of such importance to them that they would willingly endure the demands of their task.

Thank God for the resolve which does not give up in the presence of problems. Imagine the dismay which filled the minds of the four friends as they came near the house where Jesus was. They could not get near a door, much less into the presence of Jesus inside the house. The people who packed around the doors were not concerned enough to let the friends pass with their sick friend. They did not give up in the face of problems. There was yet a way in: the roof! The roof on an ancient house in Palestine was flat. It was made of beams laid across from wall to wall, perhaps three feet apart. Brushwood was laid over them and then covered with a thick blanket of mud or clay mixed with chopped straw. Such a roof was not difficult to “unroof,” or to repair afterwards. There was no need for a great portion to be uncovered, since the man could be lowered in the folded bed and let down as in a kind of bag. The four friends went to work. Soon the crippled man was lowered on his pallet through the roof and right into the presence of Jesus.

Thank God for the insight which goes to the heart of a real problem. Jesus looked at the paralytic and knew immediately what was his greatest need. He did not say to the poor man, “Your body is healed,” but rather, “Your sins are forgiven.” The real problem was guilt, not sickness. Why did Jesus forgive the sins before He pronounced the healing? (1) There was a common idea that sickness was the result of personal sin. Jesus wanted the man to be assured that both spirit and body were healed. (2) The man had a problem with guilt (the details of which are not given) and was in great need of assurance of divine forgiveness. (3) Jesus wanted to testify to all present that He had power on earth to forgive sins.

Spiritual cleansing is always more important than physical healing. Jesus began at the point of greatest need. That is an important principle to remember when we pray for friends or relatives. Let us never be content with their physical welfare alone, but with the spiritual as well. It is tragic to hear Christians (often in an evangelistic campaign) request prayer for physical healings but never mention the spiritual needs about them. A good rule to follow in prayer is this: *“Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth”* (III John 2).

Thank God for the truth which refutes error. The Pharisees from Jerusalem who were present when Jesus spoke to the infirm man were

amazed at His words, “*Son, thy sins be forgiven thee*” (Mark 2:5). They must have thought like this. (1) None can forgive sins but God only. (2) Jesus announced forgiveness of the sins of the palsied man. (3) Jesus must be God or a blasphemer. They would never admit that He is God, so they concluded He was a blasphemer and worthy of death.

“Which is easier,” Jesus asked, “to say to the palsied man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Arise, take up your bed, and walk'? I pronounced forgiveness of sin so that you might know that I the Son of Man, have power on earth to forgive sin.”

Jesus demonstrated the divine power which was upon Him. He turned to the sick and crippled man and said, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” Suddenly, miraculously, the infirm body was strong. The formerly helpless man was able to rise, roll up the pallet on which he had been brought, and walk away to his home carrying it under his arm. Truth had triumphed and men had been blessed.

The crowd could hardly believe their eyes. Some were amazed (Mark 2:12). Others were filled with fear (Luke 5:26). All glorified God (Matthew 9:8). No one but God could do what had just happened in forgiving sin and healing disease. God was at work among them in the person of Jesus!

One last thing: look down the street with your mind's eye and see five men on their way home—the formerly crippled man and his four friends. A fellowship was formed between them that lasted all their lifetimes.

Learn well that spiritual matters are the most important of all things. It is right to pray for the sick. It is right to be concerned about the hungry. It is right to wish for peace in families. But who is praying for the lost, the wayward, the weak, and the workers who are serving God? Keep spiritual values in first place.

III. MORE IMPORTANT THAN PERSONAL REPUTATION (Mark 2:15-17)

Jesus was not too wise (according to man's judgment) in His next act. He chose a publican (!) to be one of His disciples. Surely such a man's presence among Jesus' inner circle of friends would greatly hinder the work among the “good” people of the community. Jesus was teaching that spiritual values are more important than personal approval by unregenerate society.

There was an office in Capernaum where officials collected taxes from the Jewish citizens to pay into the treasury of Caesar who ruled the pagan Roman Empire. One of the tax collectors (called “publicans” in the King

James Version of the Bible) was named Levi. Passing by, Jesus said to him, *“Follow me.”* Levi forsook his profession and livelihood without hesitation and committed his life as a follower of Jesus.

What was the problem with that? The Jewish people generally despised the publicans. They were considered traitors to their country. They were not welcome in the “polite society” of the land. Their word of testimony was not received in a Jewish court of law. They were equated with the lowest people in the society. Such a man as Levi among the disciples would hurt the influence of Jesus among “good” people.

To make a bad matter worse, the newly enlisted publican-turned-disciple gave a great dinner and invited all the publicans of the area to attend. There among them sat Jesus and His disciples!

“How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?” (Mark 2:16). Jesus explained, *“They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”* (Mark 2:17). Christians must share the concern of Jesus for every person in spiritual need. Shame on those who limit their spiritual concern to those of their own social, economic, racial, national, or academic class. Jesus said “all the world,” “all nations,” and “every creature” should hear the gospel through the witness of Christians (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15).

To share in the ministry of God to a person in spiritual need is the highest of all privileges. A ministry to spiritual needs must take first place. It is more important than personal rest, physical healings, personal reputation, or any other thing of value. Love for souls transcended social, religious, and cultural barriers. Let the people of God show the spirit of Christ in their life and witness. That is the highest priority in service.

1. What is the historical setting of the lesson?
2. Why did Jesus need physical rest at that time?
3. How does Mark 2:2 show His spiritual concern?
4. How did four friends show their faith in Jesus?
5. Why did Jesus speak forgiveness before healing?
6. What theological problem did the Pharisees see?
7. How was God glorified in Jesus by the miracle?
8. Why did Jesus call a publican as a disciple?
9. Why did the Pharisees object?
10. What practical lessons did the lesson teach you?