

February 15, 2009
Houghton Lake UMC

“The Balance in a Disciple’s Life”

Mark 1:40-45

How many people here have experienced healing by the Lord? You know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God has healed you at one time or another? How many of you could tell that story of God’s healing intervention and blessing in your life to someone else?

In this first chapter of Mark we already see many people who had that healing experience. The disciples at this time of Jesus’ ministry witnessed Jesus’ miracles, from the man from whom Jesus drove out an evil spirit to the many people Jesus healed in Capernaum, including Peter’s mother-in-law. The witnesses of Jesus’ miracles were multiplying as He went throughout the region of Galilee. In today’s text we have a very important account of the healing of a man with leprosy. In Jesus’ day the term leprosy stood for many types of skin diseases, and the Old Testament had strict rules regarding people with these kinds of ailments. In fact, to have leprosy was seen as a direct curse from God. A person with leprosy was quarantined from the community. They were made to live outside of the city, according to the Law of Moses, in a special leper colony. If they were around other healthy people, they had to loudly proclaim, “Unclean! Unclean!” so that people on the street could avoid them. So, when this leprous man came to Jesus, you can understand why he was so desperate to be healed. Jesus was now face to face with a leper begging to be cleaned, and every one was eager to see what Jesus would do with him.

As the disciples looked on, I am sure their thoughts flashed back to the time of the Prophet Elisha and a miracle God worked through that prophet. You see, in II Kings Chapter 5 we read these words, “Now Naaman was commander of the army of the King of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.” In the course of time Naaman learned that a prophet in Israel could cure him of his leprosy. So, the King of Aram wrote a letter to the King of Israel, Jehoram, about curing Naaman’s condition. The Prophet Elisha directed the king to send Naaman to him so that the soldier would know that there was a prophet in Israel. When Naaman

came to Elisha he was told by Elisha's servant to go to the Jordan River and wash seven times, and God would heal him. He did so and was healed, and he went back to Elisha and testified. "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel." He could so testify because God had personally healed him!

So now as the disciples watched Jesus working with this leper, I can imagine this question coming to their minds: "Is Jesus a prophet like Elisha?" When the man's leprosy was healed they had their answer. Jesus was healing many—even a man with leprosy – and in time the disciples would confirm to all who would listen that a man even greater than the Prophet Elisha had come.

As I study Jesus in this chapter, one thing I notice that Jesus demonstrated to his disciples so wonderfully was how he held in perfect balance his relationship with his Heavenly Father on the one hand and the relationships He held with all of the people around him on the other. Jesus was able to perfectly balance his spiritual and physical life. In this way Jesus demonstrated this vertical and horizontal relationship for us all to witness and to live out in our lives.

It has been my experience that our spiritual life tends to move in cycles. We surrender to God and get into our spiritual life until soon the demands of the world crowd it out. Then we rededicate ourselves again to the spiritual journey and do fine for a while -- until something throws us off our routine and we find ourselves needing to re-commit to the Lord again. We feel guilty and angry with ourselves and become defeated in our walk. However, perhaps we should view it in a different way. Yes, we go in cycles. At times we waffle in our discipline. But, I think that this cycle is a positive one because through it I believe God teaches us a vital spiritual lesson that we need to work out in our life. Scripture encourages us forward in the life that we live. Then, in turn, life's experiences push us back into the scriptures for our spirits to learn again. Our learning comes in spurts and our reflection and growth follow. What we experience in the spirit we need to demonstrate (act out) in life. Then, what we experience in our life moves us back to the scriptures and the lessons of the spirit grow and mature our lives. If we have the right perspective, this ebb and flow can be seen as normal and positive.

It is immediately obvious in the gospels that Jesus had a personal relationship with God before his ministry began. We know that as early as age twelve Jesus was challenging and questioning the priests in the temple in Jerusalem when he chose to stay behind when his parents left Jerusalem to go back home. We have the testimony in Luke Chapter 2 that Jesus was obedient to his parents and that “he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.” Here we see that balance between God first and then with the people around him. Jesus testified that He was doing the will of his Heavenly Father. We also know that the Holy Spirit empowered every miracle that he did. Jesus’ relationship with God came first and his relationship with people not only came second, but also reflected the same values Jesus had with his Heavenly Father.

This needs to be the same in us. Our relationships need to reflect a balance in both arenas of life -- vertically with God first, and horizontally with people and our world second, in direct response to God’s leading. This also reflects the Old Testament 10 Commandments of Exodus 20 and what Jesus declared were the two greatest commandments in Matthew 22. Jesus identified these commandments as the Great Shema: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength (this summarizes the first 4 commandments of Moses). The second commandment is like it as Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18: Love your neighbor as yourself. This summarizes the last six of Moses’ 10 commandments. In other words, if we love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, then we will put no other gods before him, we will not make any idols, we will not misuse the name of the Lord with our mouth, and we will remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. If we are going to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we will honor our father and our mother, we will not murder, commit adultery, steal, or bare false witness against anyone. We will not covet the things that our neighbor owns. In fact, we will be sensitive to the needs of our neighbor and will work to minister to their needs on God’s behalf and in His name.

When we do this through our faith and our actions, we demonstrate that we are indeed disciples of Jesus Christ. We learn many lessons of faith and obedience when we find ourselves on the front lines representing God’s holiness, love, grace, and compassion in the face of the world’s

brokenness, sinful nature, spiritual rebellion, and ungrateful spirit. Our salvation and new God-pleasing lifestyle will place us on the front lines of right and wrong, good and evil, love and hate, freedom and slavery, generosity and selfishness, and all of the opposites our world contains. When the holiness of God in us collides with the values and Satan's temptations of the world around us, we will immediately see the need to keep our focus on God vertically, reaching out horizontally with God's compassion and ministry. We'll realize that we are now in the spiritual warfare that the Bible speaks of when we begin to lift up God's righteousness and truth to the people around us who want to do their own thing, who naturally want to rebel and resist God's will for their life. God's presence and truth in our lives will be in direct contrast to the world's values. All of the tensions of life and the temptations to compromise will present themselves to our spirit. We will need to resist these values if we are to remain faithful to the Lord. If our heart is not settled on God's lordship in our life, then the battle will rage within us to remain faithful to God or to compromise with those who want to do evil. But, if our heart is surrendered to God's lordship in our life, then the warfare will exist between us and those who bring the temptation. Either way, the conflict will be ours. In order to prevail we will need to keep a balance between our spiritual life (vertically) with the Lord and our ministry (horizontally) to those around us.

Now the words of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 9:24-27 become very real. Paul wrote, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

We are called to be Jesus' disciples! One of the biggest challenges we have as Christians is to keep our walk with the Lord in balance with our interaction with the world around us. That balance will be crucial when we enter the arena of spiritual warfare. It will be our spiritual lifeline when our life faces the world's confusion and compromise.

We must learn to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness; then we will find that everything else will fall into place. The scriptures will compel us to go out into the world with righteousness and God's love. Then our experiences in the world will compel us to get back into the scriptures to read, to reflect, to pray and to learn what God wants us to grasp next in our journey to perfection. In the process we grow in Christlikeness and discover that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. He is close at hand to mold us into the Christian person God wants us to be. Our focus must be to keep the spiritual and the physical in balance, walking faithfully with God day by day.

Let us pray...

Dear Lord, we come to you on our faith journey and seek your face, your wisdom, your direction and your strength. Help us to understand the vital balance we need to have in our lives so that we can be your witness in the world. Help us to put you first in everything so that we can represent your truth, goodness, mercy and love in the world in which we live. You have declared in your law what is right and what is wrong, and I pray that we can have the audacity and the courage to stand up for what is right in your eyes, Lord. Let us represent your righteousness with kindness and gentleness, with long-suffering and with patience. Let us shine for you in silence when no words are needed, and let us have the courage to speak your truth in quiet strength when there are ears ready to listen.

In your name we pray, Amen.