

Each Sunday, I try to provide some practical advice and instructions for living the Christian life. And in our own individual ways each of us tries to follow this guidance to the best of our abilities. Sometimes we are really good at doing what Jesus told us to do, and then there are those times when we just fall short; miss the mark. This morning, I want us to look at the one and only commandment that we all obey most of the time, even without realizing it. This command is found in a story in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, verses 40 through 45.

Read Mark 1:40-45

This man had a skin disease; in other words, he had leprosy which was a contagious skin disease. In the Bible, there was no disease regarded with more fear and pity than leprosy. People who became infested with it were banished from their families and communities; often forced to live in colonies outside the city gates. Lepers were considered social outcasts, unclean and cursed by God. If anybody came near them, they were required to cry out “unclean, unclean,” to warn the person not to come any closer.

Now re-entrance into the community for a healed leper could only come through the Temple priest who was given the responsibility of proclaiming the individual clean or unclean as recorded in the fourteenth chapter of the Book of Leviticus. Remember what we discussed several weeks ago. The Jewish people believed that diseases were directly link to your sins and required that you go to the priest before going to the doctor.

Despite the restrictions of the Old Testament, this particular leper refused to endure his outcast status. In fact, he demanded deliverance from it. And as we encounter him in verse 40, based on his belief that Jesus could heal him, he violates the Jewish Law and approaches Jesus and asks that He heal him. “If you are willing,” he said to Jesus, “You can make me clean again.” No doubt that this man had heard about the healing power of Jesus. This demonstration of faith was this man’s first step to find healing from this cursed disease. In this case, the word for faith can also be translated as belief and trust. Faith that Jesus can and will act by the power of God is a key theme in the Gospel of Mark. There was no doubt in the leper’s mind that Jesus had the power to heal him. However, the question was, would Jesus be willing to heal him?

When Jesus sees the man’s faith, He is moved with pity. With compassion, Jesus responds as He had done previously when people came to Him. Remember with compassion, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the grave; with compassion He also raised the widow’s son from the dead in the Gospel of Luke; and His compassion for the crowd led to the feeding of the 5,000. Compassion marked the ministry of Jesus. We worship a compassionate God who, seeing our suffering, our faith and our circumstances, often moves to make us well.

Jesus simply reached out His hand and touched the man, and immediately the leper was made clean. Now Jesus did not need to touch the leper in order to heal him, but He does so, thus violating the taboo of touching a leper. The hand of God stretched forth in answer to a humble, believing prayer. Jesus, and Jesus alone, can cause the seemingly impossible to suddenly become possible, even in the twinkling of an eye. This story shows us that there is hope for all of us who are or who will at some time in the future suffer from some disease or illness.

Then Jesus sternly warns the now healed man not to say anything; in other words, don't tell anybody what happened. Jesus did so because His time of suffering had not yet come, and He did not want any confusion to come over His mission. It may also be that Jesus did not just want to be known as a miracle worker; this would distract from His teachings and His real purpose for coming to earth; that is, to bring salvation for all of us who believe in Him. But the man, overjoyed because of the mercy shown him couldn't keep it to himself. He just had to tell anybody who would listen to him about Jesus; that Jesus could heal even lepers; the greatest outcasts of society.

Jesus tries to channel the former leper's enthusiasm when He says in effect: "Let's play this by the rule book. Go straight to the priest who declared you unclean in the first place and let him now declare you clean. Take the required sacrifice for cleansing with you as a testimony to God's miraculous touch. And by the way, don't tell anyone else, not even the priest."

Some people might suggest that this man was disobedient; he did not obey the Lord's command to keep quiet. On the face of it, this argument would be correct. However, think about it. If you have ever been an outcast, if you have ever been labeled unclean, and if you have ever had a seemingly incurable disease, and the Lord healed you, could you keep it to yourself? For the joy in your heart would be so overwhelming, that you just have to tell somebody, anybody who would listen, about the Lord's goodness and mercy.

Have you ever been an outcast? Had physical ailments, problems, family arguments, or divisions that isolated you from others? Have you experienced Jesus rescuing you from the pain and agony associated with it? When deliverance comes, you can't stop singing. You can't stop shouting. You can't stop telling others. Have you ever felt like this way, been so excited that you couldn't keep the news to yourself?

Because of this man's enthusiasm Jesus was not able to enter the town and had to stay out in the country. However, Mark in reporting this incident does not indicate that Jesus was upset with the man. It may have caused Jesus to change His travel plans, but who can complain about a soul giving thanks to God like this man did. His testimony and witness drew multitudes to Jesus. Verse 45 tells us that the people came to Jesus from all over the country.

Now you may not consider yourself among the outcasts of society, but think about all that Jesus has done for you. I don't believe that any of us has not experienced the hand of Jesus touching our lives in some positive manner. We have all had problems that have brought us to the point of despair and to our knees. We have all experienced loss, pain, suffering and disappointments in our life. We have all at some point felt like the great Old Testament prophet Elijah when he stated in 1 Kings 19:10 - "Lord, I am the only one of Your servants left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

But God took care of Elijah and He will take care of us in our time of need. Just think for a moment about the times that God has been there for you. And then consider all the blessings that He has bestowed on you. The love we receive from Jesus goes far beyond mere touching and healing. Jesus gave His life to save us and free us from the bondage of sin and death. You might not be an outcast, but like the leper, you are definitely a recipient of God's love and amazing grace.

One of my favorite stories is about a little boy who had to go to the hospital to have a piece of deformed bone removed from his arm. The surgery went well, but before the boy left the hospital he sent for his doctor. "You wanted to see me, Willie?" asked the doctor. The boy reached out and put his hand on the doctor's shoulder and said: "My mama will never hear the last about you." I think that if we fully realized all that Jesus has done for us, we would say to Him: "My friends will never hear the last about you."

Now you may be thinking right now, didn't Jesus tell the man to keep quiet, not tell anyone? And aren't there other places in the New Testament where Jesus gave similar instructions? Yes, there are other incidents like we discussed last Sunday when Jesus asked His disciples who did people said He was and Peter declared: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus warned them not to tell anybody that He was the Messiah. Then there is the story of Jesus' transfiguration in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew when Moses and Elijah came to give Jesus a pep talk before He went to the cross. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus told Peter, James, and John to not tell anybody about what they had seen; until, here's the key word, until the Son of Man had been raised from the dead. After that happened, they would be free and expected to tell all.

Yes, Jesus told the leper and the disciples not tell anybody until His mission on earth was completed. Jesus came to die for our sins and to rise from the grave defeating death and the devil forever, as part of God's plan for salvation. And now that has been accomplished on the cross at Calvary and the empty tomb in the garden, there is no reason to keep quiet. Now is the time to shout it from the mountain top.

In Matthew 28 right before He ascended into heaven, Jesus gave His disciples and us the Great Commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you." And the disciples did just that. From a small band of followers the word spread like wild fire on the dry plains all over the world. You and I are here this morning because someone could not and did not keep the Good News to themselves. Thanks be to God for loud mouths!

Jesus knew that once people experienced His presence and love that they could not keep it to themselves; they would be overwhelmed with joy and the desire to share it with others. Remember when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: the people began shouting "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." The Pharisees asked Jesus to tell the crowd to be quiet, but Jesus replied: "I tell you if they keep quiet, the very stones will cry out." If even the rocks would shout for joy at the presence of Jesus Christ, shouldn't we be willing to sing His praises and tell the world what He has done for us?

There used to be a Mercedes Benz TV commercial that showed their car colliding with a concrete wall during a safety test. Someone asked the company spokesperson why they did not enforce their patent on the Mercedes Benz energy-absorbing car body, a design that was copied by other companies because of its success. He replied: "Because some things in life are too important not to share." How true; into this category also falls the Good News of Jesus Christ.

A common misconception among Christians is that we don't have to tell anybody; we'll just demonstrate it by the way we live. And I truly believe that how we live our daily lives does witness to our faith as much as anything else. However, Billy Graham was once asked which is more important: to witness by one's life or to witness by the Word. His answer was: "Which is more important, the left wing or the right wing of an airplane?" In reality we witness for Christ by both ways: by life and by word: the two, where possible, should go hand in hand. God's desire for you and for me now that we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior is to witness to the world of His amazing grace and power.

And believe me, there is a world out there today that is starving to hear the Good News, your story of who Jesus Christ is to you and what He has done for you. Think about your family members, loved ones, friends, neighbors and co-workers who are facing difficult times right now and are searching for one ray of hope in their lives. They either have not found Jesus or don't have a strong personal relationship with Him. Nobody has told them about the One who can ease their pain, bring hope and love into their lives, and make them feel whole once more. And if someone did share the Good News with them in the past, they weren't ready to listen; however, now they are. They need someone to come and tell them the story; the old, old story

of a Savior who came from glory; who came looking just for them to give them victory over life and death, over sin and suffering, over pain and disappointment.

And what better time to share this Good News than now as the summer ends , schools starting and we getting back to a normal routine. With all the events that are planned over the few months, now is a perfect time to invite someone to church. Take the bulletin insert and then invite that neighbor, friend, or family member that God has been nudging to you share His love with. Don't keep quiet; someone's place in eternity may depend on your willingness to share Jesus with them; I don't believe Jesus wants us to keep quiet anymore. Amen