

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Mark 1:40-45; 1 Corinthians 9

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It seems like there are a lot of versions of Christianity out there. It can get confusing, like the intertwined scripture read this morning. Which is the truest story? The Mark passage and the 1 Corinthians passage both reveal something of the story of Christianity. They are part of the same Bible, but they paint quite different pictures of what Christianity is all about. But imagine if we only had one of the passages and that was all we had to go on.

Imagine if all we had of Christianity was the passage from 1 Corinthians. Not Christianity, but “Athlete-ianity.” The scholars who filled the seminaries on this one passage of scripture would teach about the Isthmian games, eternity—imperishable wreath, boxing, discipline.

‘Runners competing in a race’ would be the model of this faith. And there would be much good about it. Athlete-ianity is a way of life requiring discipline, seriousness, focus. It’s an ongoing journey of ever-growing dedication, strength, and effectiveness. Like a runner, the more you run, the more you are able to run. The more disciplined you are, the more that discipline strengthens you. It’s a faith for healthy people pushing to be healthier. It would be all about what we do and what we can accomplish on our own strength. There would be no room for weakness, failure, or those who are unable to run the race. For people who are not capable, the way of life imagined would seem unattainable. They could sit and watch from the sidelines.

Imagine, on the other hand, if all we knew of Christianity was the story from Mark about Jesus healing the leper. “Leper-ianity.” Scholars would point back to ancient pronouncements about leprosy.

Leviticus 13 is kind of a manual for diagnosing skin diseases. It is explicit and specific. It’s one of those “How did this get in the Bible?” chapters: “when a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or eruption or a spot and it turns into a case of leprous disease on the skin of his body he shall be brought to the priest . . . If the skin turns white and the disease goes beneath the surface, it is leprosy. He is unclean.” It goes on to talk about raw flesh, boils, itching diseases, and what to do about baldness. They didn’t understand where these things came from and just knew that to preserve the health of the community, that if you weren’t healthy, you needed to be separated from everyone else. So the final prescription for someone who was stricken with the disease spells out a lonely, shameful existence: “the leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

The leper who came to Jesus violated his forced isolation; he circumvented the diagnosis of the religious system. In his desperation he sought and found in Jesus someone who could make him whole.

The difference between the two stories is clear. In one we are seeking glory; in the other, we simply need to survive. In one we are winners who are crowned. In the other we are losers who are healed.

So, two pictures of what it means to be a Christian. But very different. And both versions are preached every Sunday somewhere. You are a champion—now get up and do good for Jesus. You are a weak, useless sinner; now come to Jesus and be saved.

One is a picture of healthy people straining forward on mission and ministry . . .

One is a picture of broken people being made whole . . .

One is a story of what we can do for Christ when we give our all. . .

One is a story of what Christ does in us when we are most helpless . . .

Whereas in one we are all runners questing for glory, in the other we are all lepers in need of healing. Actual leprosy has all but vanished on the earth. But we can relate to the story. We have hurts and broken places inside that no one can see. Into this room this morning came some spiritual champions, healthy and whole, disciplined and growing. Also into this room this morning came hearts that are broken, souls that are tormented, minds that are full of self-loathing and doubt, wills that are compromised, consciences that are wrecked with guilt and shame, brittle souls that are almost crushed with despair. You are not alone if you have ever had the thought, “If they knew the truth about me, they would kick me out of here.” If we were all required to speak the truth about ourselves when we come close to other people, the room would be filled with many voices crying out, “Unclean! Unclean!” If our physical bodies were the exact representation of the state of our souls and we were able to see for just one moment what God sees, would you be a robust Olympic champion or a limping, shriveled leper, cautiously seeking healing and finding that by his grace and power, and his grace and power alone, you are miraculously healed . . .cleansed . . .saved?

Which is the truer story of Christianity?

Is a Christian someone who is strong and on mission for Christ?

Is a Christian someone who has nothing left but a plea for Christ’s healing, saving touch?

It strikes me that DaySpring is about both versions of Christianity and both kinds of people and, for each of us, about the strength and weakness we have within us. For many people, the experience of coming here is to enter a relaxing architecture that is free and reverent, simple yet image rich. In it we live into the architecture of worship that has a sure foundation and is comfortable and comforting. For many of us it just feels like home, the way home should feel. How many of us tell the story of coming through the doors for worship the first time, and sitting to worship and just feeling like this is what you’ve been needing, but you just didn’t know it. Some people, when coming here, just sat in the back and wept during every service as their hearts were mended by the gentle touch of the Great Physician. This is a place of rest and healing. For many of us, who were hurting deeply inside, we came through the doors and furtively brought our brokenness to the Healer.

When you come in here, you aren't told to toe the line and get ready to run as hard as you can until you drop. You are invited to rest and let God touch you. If that's all you need in life right now, let this be that for you. When you are spiritually empty, or broken, wrecked, confused, in pain, when life has you running so hard in so many different directions that you feel like you are going to be torn apart, just come and rest in God and start to be healed—as long as it takes.

But when you are ready to get up and walk, DaySpring can help. Experiencing spiritual depth and growth in your life may seem like a distant dream, but you know what they say about how every journey starts . . . with one step. When you are ready, we think we can help you begin to move toward God's vision for this life with spiritual discipline and practices. We call that Spiritual Formation and it is the process which the Fathers called *theosis*—the full indwelling of God in you and through you. It's not that you have to prove to God you are worthy of having God in you. That's grace. It's more that it takes time and discipline to really become people who are capable of opening ourselves up in such a way to recognize God within us and live in such a way that the God within us transforms our being. This rarely happens overnight.

“The full indwelling of God in me and through me?” That sounds unattainable. About like running a marathon does to me right now. I see people do it, but I can't imagine doing it. And yet, there is a path of exercise and discipline towards a marathon. There is a path of spiritual formation, following the Fathers, towards *theosis*. One of the ways we are collaborating as a staff is to help us be the kind of church in which that path is made available to everyone who chooses to embark upon it.

We would be mistaken to believe that life is a linear progression from being a leper to walking to running to glory. Life's not like that. It has twists and turns, circles and loops. The experience of people who have grown closer to *theosis* is the experience of feeling themselves more like the leper. The more you run, the more you know you need God to help you keep moving. The more disciplined you are, the more you realize it's all about grace.

That's sort of an irony isn't it? You would think it would be the other way around. That first we know we need grace, but then we can rely on ourselves like a child growing up. But the reality is actually like childhood. When we are children, we are helped, but we think we can do it on our own. I remember my two-year-old firstborn insisting, “No help me. I can do it all by myself.”

As we get older and wiser, we realize more and more that we can't do it all by ourselves. We can do very little “all by myself” and we learn to appreciate the help that others offer in every aspect of our lives, and we grow in the knowledge of our dependence on God's sustenance for every breath we take. The greatest athletes in the world have the best coaches and cheerleaders and trainers and support. No one who gets very far does it “all by myself.”

So, maybe the truest story of Christianity is that we are broken people who are made whole by the grace of Christ in faith, that we are given his power in us to run the spiritual race with discipline and commitment, through which we come to the full realization that we still have broken places to be healed.

Through a sermon by Chuck Poole I was reminded of the line from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places." Chuck reflects, "Seldom, if ever, has a single sentence so fully embraced clear-eyed realism and wide-eyed hope. The world breaks everyone. That is the voice of clear-eyed realism. And afterward many are strong at the broken places. That is the voice of wide-eyed hope. Sooner or later life does break almost everyone. Very few people will manage to make it through life in this world unscathed by trouble, unbruised by pain, unbothered by disease, untouched by sorrow." Spiritual champions are not those few remaining people that escape the trials of life and thus are uninhibited from the easy path to God. Spiritual champions are the ones who open their lives to the presence of God, "whose nature it is to enlarge us, deepen us, and make us better because of what we have endured." (Poole)

In the most dedicated Christians, there are places of tender brokenness. And deep within the most desperate person here this morning, there is a spiritual giant in every way the co-equal with the most renowned saints of the church. Discovering both within each of us is what DaySpring is trying to be about because it is what the cross is all about—where the true stories of Christianity all meet. The place where the greatest weakness, sin, sorrow, and grief of the world meet the greatest strength, love, and hope of God. At the foot of the cross, we are broken in our strongest places and made strong in our broken places.

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