

# Jesus' New World Order

Message 3

## *Ultimate Health*

Mark 1:40-2:17

### *Disease*

What do you fear more than anything else? Your first big exam of the semester? Rejection by your friends? That you will never find a husband or wife? Death? For many Americans one of the top fears is disease. We spend a vast portion of our national income on health care and invest corresponding sums on medical research. Every newspaper and magazine has several columns and articles informing us of the latest health news and pointing out ways to improve our physical well-being. Gyms and fitness centers proliferate as Americans pursue youthful looks and a healthy physique. Now, this is very good. It is quite desirable to keep our bodies in good shape, and it would be crazy to desire illness. A problem can arise, however, when health becomes our number one goal. In that case it has become an idol, taking the place of God and leading us into sin.

I will admit that I fear a prolonged and painful disease more than death. The rise of suicide among the seriously ill in our culture shows that others feel the same way. It is the long, agonizing decline that makes cancer so terrible. Perhaps you have known someone who has died of cancer. Perhaps you witnessed the enormous suffering. If you are like most of us, you asked yourself, "Why did this have to happen? and "Where is God in the midst of this suffering?" Where indeed is God? Does He care about us, or is He impotent to help? If He were here now, would He do anything for us? This evening's scripture answers that question, for it shows us what God did when He lived among men 2,000 years ago.

If a painful disease is a frightening thing, then my worst fear is AIDS. It is a hideous disease. The body slowly dies under the onslaught of infections which it is powerless to fight. Germs which do not affect the rest of us, or result in a temporary illness, tear apart the body of the AIDS victim, and finally bring him to a gruesome death. In addition to the physical suffering is the social stigma. Most – not all, but most AIDS patients contract the disease through some illicit sexual activity. In spite of the best efforts to cover up this reality, when society looks at someone suffering with AIDS, they perceive sin behind it. But aside from this, the gruesomeness of the disease repels people, so they have a powerful urge to avoid the sick. I am not saying this is right – just that it is the way things are. AIDS patients are enslaved in a world of physical pain and social rejection.

### *The Compassionate Jesus*

When we come to this story about Jesus and the leper, it is easy to miss how startling His behavior was. Lepers mean nothing to us. We do not know any, and the disease has no social meaning today. The exact nature of Biblical leprosy is unclear to us. It certainly included more conditions than the disease we call leprosy now. What is clear, however, is that it was revolting and carried a social stigma. We can see from Biblical accounts that leprosy was a living hell. People were terrified of it and steered clear of lepers. The law of Moses mentioned leprosy specifically, and prescribed isolation for those who were so afflicted. Furthermore, it was perceived to result from sin. And with good reason. When Moses' sister Miriam revolted against her brother's leadership, she was immediately struck with leprosy. (Numbers 12:10) Only the prayer of Moses restored her. Much later, good king Uzziah disobeyed God by entering the temple to offer the sacrifices which only the priests were permitted to offer. When the priests confronted him, he became angry. The scripture says, "and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead." (2 Chronicles 26:19) Uzziah was confined to an isolated house and died in solitude.

The Bible itself is witness to the reality that leprosy was a judgment of God, but as is so often the

case, the people made it worse. The law provided that lepers were to live apart, but did not suggest that people were to mistreat them. In their fear and revulsion, though, people treated lepers worse than animals. They had to live apart from everyone else – outside the city. But the most humiliating aspect of leprosy was the law that they must warn people away from them. They had to cry out “Unclean, unclean” whenever anyone approached. (Leviticus 13:45-46) Can you imagine going for a whole year, or a decade, or a lifetime, never touching anyone? Touch is a very important part of human relationships, and to be deprived of the touch of a fellow man or woman is a terrible condition. And the worst part of it is, the thing which you crave the most is the thing which you must forcibly deny yourself. Leprosy was a living hell, much like AIDS today. Stigmatized, rejected, the leper had a lifetime of pain and isolation to look forward to.

Now we can see the shocking nature of Jesus’ action. Jesus did not run away. He showed no fear or revulsion. Horrors, He actually touched the man! Not even a fool and a lawbreaker would touch a leper! What is going on here? Does Jesus think He can help this wretched dog, rejected by God and man? But who would *want* to? Is he not paying the price for his sin? And now what will Jesus do if *He* gets leprosy? *Then* where will his Kingdom be?

Why would Jesus risk everything on this miserable leper? Happily, the answer to this question is right here in the text. It says that Jesus was moved with compassion. He did not see a threat to Himself, or a sinner paying His debt to God – He saw a fellow man in enormous pain. When God came to earth and saw suffering, He did not turn the other way. He shared in our suffering, and used His divine power to heal the unhealable. There were no doctors anywhere on earth that could provide a remedy, but Jesus did the impossible. Fever, demons, ordinary sickness – we have seen Him heal these. Now we have seen Him heal a really difficult case. Who but God could do this? Who but God would care to?

This, by the way, is the Christian answer to 9/11. The destruction of the Twin Towers and the death of 3,000 people was a horrible disaster. Where is God when such things happen? God is present. He joins in our suffering and comforts the grieving. This passage shows us the heart of God. In our worst moments, when we least deserve it, God cares for us.

But if we stop there we commit a grave oversight. As we saw earlier, leprosy in the Bible is always associated in some way with sin. Does this passage show that Jesus does not care about sin? Do we take His simple healing of the physical disease without reference to sin an indication that sin is irrelevant? If we were to fall into this mistake, the next story shows clearly that sin is a constant issue with Jesus.

### ***The Forgiving Jesus***

Chapter two opens with Jesus teaching to a packed house – literally. People were squeezing through the door, leaning in the windows, stuffed in all the corners, straining to hear from the courtyard. Here come four men with a friend on a stretcher. He is paralyzed, and they want Jesus to heal him. Persistent and resourceful, they make a hole in the roof and lower the stretcher right down in front of Jesus. Success! You can just feel the mixture of relief and anticipation – for they know that in a few seconds the paralyzed man will be leaping off the stretcher, full of health and rejoicing in his renewed ability to walk and run.

But what is this? “Son, your sins are forgiven you.” Wait a minute! Jesus, you got the wrong script! It is supposed to be, “Rise, take up your stretcher and walk!” What a waste. Did we go through all this for nothing, just to hear something about sin? Sin is not the issue here – it is the paralysis. Let’s get things in the right order. How much sin can a paralyzed man do anyway? Heal the man, and then he will be able to serve God.

If the man’s friends were dismayed by Jesus’ strange pronouncement, so were some of the crowd.

The scribes were the religious leaders of the day – rather like preachers or Bible teachers or seminary professors. They were experts in the scripture and had an opinion about its true meaning and application in all particulars. They knew that only God could forgive sin. The Bible unambiguously teaches that. After all, sin is breaking God's law. How could anyone else forgive an offense against God? If I insult Sean, can I go and ask Mark for forgiveness? Can Mark grant forgiveness? Of course not! We can easily see that it would be silly to think that Mark could forgive me when I insult Sean. So only God can forgive sin.

We are thus presented with a clear alternative. In order to forgive sin, Jesus had to be God. Either He was faking it and blasphemed God (i.e. grossly insulted Him), or Jesus truly did forgive the man's sin – in which case He was God Himself! Have you noticed yet, at every turn, whatever Jesus does, He gives us more reason to believe that He can be nothing other than the Son of God – as Mark said in the beginning?

But what about the poor man? Well and good that Jesus, if He is God, can forgive sins. What about the real business at hand? Well, the real business at hand has already been done. What is left is the consequence of the forgiveness of sin. Haven't you seen that this man's primary problem is not his paralysis, but his sin? This is what Jesus is trying to get across here. We have seen ample evidence that Jesus cares about our physical ailments, but they are not our biggest need. For even when the physical need is remedied, there is still our relationship with God to resolve.

### ***The Awfulness of Sin***

Perhaps the biggest reason why this is so easily missed is that we have a weak understanding of sin. We may think that sin is murder, or rape, or arson. Perhaps we heard our mothers say it is a sin to leave food on your plate or be late for church. We tend to think of sin as either deeds too bad for us to do, or too trivial for God to notice. In reality, though, sin is much different than these notorious or silly actions. Sin is disobeying God's commands. The Bible contains many of these. You are probably familiar with the Ten Commandments.

- 1) You shall have no other gods before Me.
- 2) You shall not make for yourself a carved image.
- 3) You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
- 4) Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
- 5) Honor your father and your mother.
- 6) You shall not murder.
- 7) You shall not commit adultery.
- 8) You shall not steal.
- 9) You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- 10) You shall not covet.

Exodus 20:2-17

God is very serious about these commands. The Old Testament is full of examples of people who doubted this and paid for their foolishness. Idolaters, Sabbath-breakers, murderers – these all found that God means business. King David is one of the most famous examples. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, then killed her husband. Consequently, God killed his infant son and caused his own sons to revolt against him. Breaking God's law is a deadly thing to do.

But sin is more than breaking God's law. It is also failure to love God. God made us, provides for us, sustains us, cares for us. It is monstrously ungrateful if we do not love Him. In fact, Jesus said our most serious obligation is to love God more than anything. (Matthew 22:37-38) How would you feel if you poured your heart out for someone, sacrificing yourself to please him or her, only to find yourself rejected

for another? It is perhaps the greatest anguish humans bear. This gives us a sense of why God expects our love for Him to be supreme.

The point we are making here is that the most serious problem everyone on earth faces is what to do about his or her sin. Leprosy, paralysis, fever – these might all be healed, but if sin is still present, we remain under God’s judgment. Adam brought death into the world by his sin, and spiritual death is the lot of all who practice sin. The Psalmist says

The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man,  
to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.  
They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;  
there is none who does good, not even one.

(Psalm 14:2-3)

All have become corrupt. That means you, too. We all are spiritual lepers, spiritual paralytics. We are spiritually repulsive and unable to help ourselves. If people clearly saw the true state of your heart, they would be so disgusted with you, so nauseated, they would turn and run out and lock the door behind them. But here is where Jesus’ words come to us as a heavenly chorus. “Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven.” What you cannot do for yourself, Jesus does for you. He takes your putrid heart and makes it fresh and clean and delightful. The gospel is the message of God’s forgiveness of sins. How can God forgive our sins? This is a mystery that is revealed as we progress through the book of Mark. But for now, you can be assured that this same Jesus who can heal the leper and cast out demons can also forgive your sins.

Lest we doubt that Jesus has the power to forgive sins, or think that He has grown callous toward suffering among us, we should note that Jesus did indeed heal the paralytic. By performing this great miracle He proved that He was operating with divine power – certainly not what we should expect from a blasphemous. But by now we can see that the paralysis was second in importance to the spiritual healing. Ultimate health is not perfection of body, but perfection of both soul and body.

### ***The Savior Jesus***

The final paragraph in this evening’s passage shows us how we should respond to Jesus’ teaching. Again, Jesus has made the unfortunate choice to associate with repulsive people, this time the tax collectors. These were Jews, but odious Jews – traitors who collected taxes for the hated Roman rulers. It would be like an American who buys bombs and guns for Al-Qaeda. No doubt Jesus angered His disciples by calling Matthew to follow them. Think of the poison to their reputation! Then they went and had dinner with a whole den of these foul creatures. The scribes articulate what everyone is thinking: how could Jesus do such a disgusting thing?

Jesus responds with a parable. In essence, He says, I came for those who need me. And who is it that needs Jesus? Isn’t it the worst of us? Isn’t it the terrorists, traitors, pedophiles, embezzlers, abortionists, and such who need Jesus the most? Doesn’t it make sense that Jesus came for those who need him? And doesn’t it make sense that the people who need Jesus so desperately should flock to Him?

Do you need Jesus? Or are you good on your own? If you need Jesus, you must go where he is – with the leper, with the sinners, among the tax collectors – in company with the terrorists, pedophiles, and embezzlers. If you understand that your sin has made you repulsive in his sight, but He loves you and forgives you anyway, you will understand why He accepts the outcasts of this world, and you will accept them, too.

Do you think you are basically good enough for God? Are you like the scribes who find fault with others? Or do you see that you, like all of us, are corrupt all the way through? Are you trusting your own good behavior to earn acceptance with God? Or do you see the need for a savior to forgive you of your sin? Are you standing outside the house looking in judgment at Jesus? Or have you come in with the rest of us sinners to hear Him and eat with Him?

Do not trust your own goodness. Do not remain outside Jesus' Kingdom. Believe Jesus when He offers you forgiveness of your sins. Trust Him to save you from God's judgment. Pray to God right now. Tell Him you want to be forgiven of your sins and follow Jesus. And like the leper, paralytic, and tax collectors, join the other forgiven rebels at His feast.

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