

Epiphany 6  
Is All Publicity Good?  
Mark 1:40-45  
Feb. 24, 2019

Doesn't it seem to you that the scandals among celebrities are endless? One is checking into rehab. Another is getting a divorce. Another is pregnant outside of marriage. Another staged an assault to gain publicity and may go to jail. The list of questionable behavior is quite long and the tabloids make quite a profit from it.

Every so often we will hear an agent of one of these celebrities say something like this, "All publicity is good publicity." In other words, "I don't really care if they drag my client's name through the mud. At least my client's name is out there and so is the potential for profit from my client's indiscretions. If it gets their name out there so that they are offered more work, great!" Whether the image is good or bad - famous or infamous, it doesn't make any difference as long as the client gets more work.

Advertising people also seem to have this kind of attitude. They sometimes tell us that "Bad taste sells." This seems to be true because every so often we hear or see an advertisement for a product that is absolutely disgusting and then learn that merchants can't keep the product on the shelves because sales are so high. As long as the ad creates a demand for the product, who cares how stupid or offensive the ad is?

Jesus had a problem with this kind of thinking in His early ministry. He was very popular, but His popularity wasn't always a positive thing. He was often popular for all the wrong reasons.

Jesus' main goal was the forgiveness of sins - your sins - my sins - the sins of the entire world. His method was to live a perfect life followed by suffering and death on a cross. His main message was, [Mark 1:15] "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." His mission was a rescue mission from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Many people who followed Jesus during His early ministry didn't understand this. They saw Jesus' miracles, but they didn't understand the true purpose of these miracles. Jesus' miracles were signs that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah who had come into the world to save it from sin. Never the less, many people did not see these miracles as signs, but saw them as the main mission instead. They believed the very popular, but very mistaken notion that the Messiah's main mission was to save us from earthly troubles like hunger, disease, and oppression by foreign governments. They did not see the eternal goals of Jesus' mission.

Today's text is a case in point. Jesus was out and about spreading the good news of the kingdom of God when a leper approached Him. The physical needs of the leper were obvious. The leprosy was eating its way into his body even while he was still walking and

talking. It was as if his body was going through the decay of death, but enough of his organs still worked so that he wasn't dead yet.

The leper approached Jesus with some very interesting words. He obviously wanted Jesus to heal him, but his request takes the form of a confession. "If you will, you can make me clean." These words are more of a creed than a request. He has complete faith that Jesus can heal him, but recognizes that Jesus in His perfect knowledge and wisdom may choose not to do so. He comes with nothing but simple faith that relies on Christ's mercy. His words along with his kneeling posture show that he has a proper understanding that Jesus is more than just a man.

Jesus' heart went out to this man. Of course it was His will to heal him. Jesus said to him, "I will; be clean," and immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. At Jesus' word, the man went from a body of decaying flesh to perfect health. Modern medicine can cure many forms of leprosy, but they all work gradually over time and cannot restore lost toes and fingers. The word "immediately" tells us that Jesus' healing was instantaneous. The word clean tells us that the man's health was better than if the leprosy had never happened - the healing was perfect.

As soon as Jesus healed the man, though, things get a little bit weird. Instead of telling this man to tell others what he has seen, heard, and experienced, Jesus said, "See that you say nothing to anyone ..." In fact, the Greek of this passage indicates that Jesus seemed angry or frustrated with this man. The sternness of His command seems out of character for Jesus.

Why would Jesus give such a strange instruction? Why would He act so out of character? Today's text goes on to show us the reason for this instruction – it's because the man decided to disobey Jesus' command. Instead of keeping the healing to himself and showing himself to the priests, he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news. As a result, we can see the problem. Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places ... Not only was Jesus hindered from taking His message to the people, but even when they came, He had to undo their false ideas before He could teach them His true message.

We can't really blame the man for wanting to tell everyone what Jesus did. His sudden return from the living death of leprosy to new life and perfect health carried him away. How could anyone keep his mouth shut after such an experience? The man meant well, but his well-intentioned judgment was mistaken. He listened to his own heart instead of the Lord's command. He disobeyed Jesus' command and inadvertently retarded the Lord's work.

As I said before, Jesus wanted the world to know that He was the Messiah who came to take away the sins of the world. But too often, people got the idea that He came to ease the burden of their earthly lives. The crowds often saw Him as a source of free medical care, free emotional counseling, or free food. Very rarely did people look to Jesus for salvation from

sin, death, and the power of the devil. Even His most faithful disciples did not truly begin to understand until after Jesus rose from the dead. It is this confusion about the true nature of the Christ that caused Jesus to instruct people to keep it to themselves when He healed their bodies.

The errors concerning the mission of Jesus still abound today. Many well-meaning people teach about the Jesus who will make us prosperous, the Jesus who will be our life's coach, the Jesus who will teach us how to have our best life now, or the Jesus who will give us purpose. When people teach a message like this, they are very popular. Of course they are popular. They are telling people what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear. They believe that because the Jesus they teach about is popular, that they are teaching about the true Jesus.

They may mean well, but their good intentions are mistaken. Instead of judging their message by the Word of God, they judge their message by its popularity. They are following the celebrity motto that says, "All publicity is good publicity." Some even follow the advertising motto that says, "Bad taste sells." They believe they are doing God's work because they are popular. In fact, they are inadvertently retarding the Lord's work. They are popularizing a false Jesus.

Jesus Himself tells us who He really is. Jesus teaches [Mark 8:31] that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

The Jesus of the Bible is the Christ who was crucified for our sins and rose on the third day. The Jesus of the Bible is the one who saves us from our sins in spite of the fact that there is no goodness in us. The Jesus of the Bible is the only one who saves us from our sins - there is no other savior. The Jesus of the Bible is about the pure grace of our eternal welfare, not the glory of our earthly popularity and success.

This message is not popular, but it is the message we find in the Bible. The healing miracles and the other miracles that Jesus does are not the main goal of His ministry. They are only sign posts on the way to the main goal.

The healing in today's text points us to Jesus, not just as the one who cleansed one person from leprosy in one time and one place, but as the one who cleanses all people from all sin in all times and in all places. He did this with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death that we may all be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness even as He has risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. Amen