

“Unintended Consequences”

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Mark 1:40-45

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There are times when I've got things figured out, and thank you very much, but I'm going to do it my way! I'm guessing that there are times when each of us is like that. Cycling used to be my thing. I had a nice bike, and the clothes and I rode a lot with friends. I subscribed to the magazine. Watched the Tour de France on TV. I was hard core.

I had a serious fall, and broke my right hip. I was warned not to go back to riding too soon, but thank you very much, I knew what I was doing. I went back as soon as I could. And wouldn't you know it, I fell again. It wasn't all that serious a fall, but the hip wasn't strong, and it broke again. And this time, it didn't heal right, so now I have an artificial hip. And I have no bike...

What if the “thank you very much” is said to the Lord? Our scripture text is a snapshot of one man's encounter with Jesus and some of the ramifications of what he did and didn't do. The story set me thinking about the importance of our lives and our responses, and one good way God has provided to keep us on track and focused.

Read Mark 1:40-45

I. What was the significance of this man's being a leper? I suspect we've all seen movies of lepers—they go around in ragged clothing calling out “Unclean, Unclean.”

In the Old Testament, a number of skin diseases grouped under the name “leprosy” rendered one ceremonially unclean. From our present perspective, the lines seem to be blurred between moral issues, medical issues, and ceremonial considerations. Without untangling all that, let us acknowledge that the life of a leper was truly pitiful.

If one had a rash or a sore on the skin, he or she went to the priest to have it examined. The person was typically declared unclean and isolated for a week to see what would happen, then finally declared clean or unclean depending on how the condition progressed. (Leviticus 13 & 14 give instructions.)

If one is declared unclean, touching them was the equivalent of touching a corpse—so they could cause others to become ceremonially unclean. Thus they must live alone, “outside the camp.” They are to call out “unclean” when others are nearby. Further, they were in a perpetual state of mourning, so they wore torn clothing, they wore cloth over the lower part of their faces, and their hair was unkempt. No wonder leprosy was thought of as living death.

Obviously, all this kept lepers from close social relationships. It also kept them from any gainful employment, so they were constantly impoverished and begging. Theirs was a desperate situation.

The leper in our story had somehow heard about Jesus, and come to believe that Jesus could heal him. He believed it enough to approach Jesus—and for a leper to approach anyone was a bold step. He said, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus responded by touching him—an unheard of thing to do, and saying “I choose. Be made clean!”

This was a profoundly gracious act by Jesus. If leprosy was living death, Jesus had returned this man to life! But there is more.

II. What did Jesus show by cleansing him? In the whole of the Old Testament, only two lepers are recorded as having been cleansed, and those to show the power of God through a prophet at a particular time. One of those prophets was Moses, and the other Elisha. A priest had a ritual for declaring a person clean, but was powerless to cleanse them.

The fact that Jesus healed a leper showed that God was doing a new thing in him. Remember that when John the Baptist sent his followers to Jesus to ask if he were “the one,” Jesus responded by listing the actions he was performing. One of those actions was that lepers were being cleansed. Jesus used this as an act demonstrating that he was the messiah.

There are some features of this story which may puzzle us. Jesus sent the man away—presumably away from where he had been known as a leper—and told him not to say anything to anyone. Jesus also told him to show himself to the priest and to make the offering Moses commanded. Then Jesus adds: “as a testimony to them.”

III. What would have happened if the man had done these things? We’re not told whether the man went to the priest or not, but the way the story is told and the fact that he didn’t keep quiet raises doubt that he followed through with the priest, either.

- If the man went to the priest, it would have demonstrated undeniably *to the priest* that Jesus had healed the man, and should have been strong evidence to the priest that God was doing powerful things through Jesus, as we have seen when we considered the significance of cleansing a leper.
- It would have also have demonstrated to the priest that Jesus was a respecter of the law and a respecter of the place of the priesthood. Would these things have softened the relationship between Jesus and the religious establishment? We must wonder.
- It was in the man’s personal interest to go to the priest, because the priest was the one who, acting for God and for the community, would make a determination that the man had been cleansed, and so the man could be readmitted to the temple, and thus to the community.

What Mark says is that the man did not do what Jesus had told him, but spread the news freely, and that sounds like he told everyone who would listen to him.

We are told that Jesus had embarked on a preaching mission throughout Galilee, and that he specifically planned to preach in synagogues. Presumably, it’s on this mission that Jesus met the leper and cleansed him. What Mark reports is that after the man began spreading the word, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly, but he stayed in the country and people came to him from all over.

We don’t know as much as we would like about this situation—what was it that kept Jesus out of towns? Here are some thoughts:

1. Certainly the towns were small, and certainly the synagogues would have been small, too, and perhaps the crowd sizes were large enough that they overwhelmed the facilities.

From Jesus’ perspective, there were other downsides.

2. Going into a town and into a synagogue would keep Jesus’ movement and message within the synagogue system, not something that drew people away.
3. Preaching in a synagogue would allow him to speak to all the people in a town, not just the folk who would go out in the country to meet a healer.

4. Jesus' basic message was given in Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Jesus didn't want to be known as a "healer". He came to preach God's kingdom, and healings were to support that activity, not replace it.

Jesus' mission is hardly ruined by the disobedience of the man who Jesus healed of leprosy, but it isn't what Jesus wanted it to be, either. I have to ask myself what this man was thinking.

I can't believe he thought, "Stick it in your eye, Jesus. I'm going to do what I want to do, regardless of what you say." He must have assumed that what Jesus told him couldn't be all that important.

- Perhaps he was so excited to be freed from the prison of leprosy that he couldn't really believe that Jesus was serious about not telling—at least a few people—and a few more...
- Or, maybe he couldn't really believe that his talking to people would cause anyone a problem.

Some who have studied this passage think Jesus sensed that the man would talk, and that's why in verse 43, Jesus "sternly warned him."

I titled my thoughts on this passage, "Unintended Consequences." Jesus healed this guy, and the guy's response caused problems in Jesus' approach to other people.

[Application: Intended Consequences.] I must say that I think it would be easy for us to respond as this man did. It would be easy for us to make assumptions based on what seems right—be they based on excitement (as the leper did), or hard-headedness (as we heard at the beginning), or a life that is too busy or truly driven so we are less than thoughtful. I could see us making assumptions and acting on them and ending up doing things that are other than what Our Lord would want. I suggested that we think of this story in terms of "unintended consequences;" what should we do to produce "intended consequences?"

The paragraph just preceding this one (Mk. 1:35-39) is about Jesus getting up early and going by himself to pray. While he was doing this, people were inquiring about him because of the healing and preaching he had done the day before, so the disciples came looking for him. They thought things were going great, and they wanted to stay there and respond to the people who were coming.

But Jesus had been praying, and when he did, he got a fresh perspective on his timing. He had had an effective time of healing and preaching the day before, but now he had had time to prayerfully reflect on what he was sent to do, and concluded that it was time to move on and preach in other places. It was time to resume what he was sent to do.

Jesus' example of getting up early and getting by himself is an example for us. I can't say for certain that if the leper Jesus cured had done this, it would have cooled him down and refocused him on what Jesus had told him to do, but it might have.

But I can say that the days I start with intentional Bible study and prayer are far more focused and fulfilling than those I don't start that way. I can also say that it is a discipline which doesn't get easier. I am always in a hurry and always tempted to skip it. But it is a way Our Lord has provided for us and a way our lord has modeled for us to produce more "intended consequences" in our lives.

Let me challenge you. Let your day tomorrow be a product of that meeting. When you get home today, set your alarm a little earlier and begin your day tomorrow as Jesus did—with him.