April 18/19, 2009

Facing Disease

Facing our Stuff: Finding Hope in Our Hurts, Hang-Ups and Habits

Mark 2:1-17

Pastor Bryan Clark

Many years ago when our children were small, we as a family were encouraged to adopt an unreached people group. Basically your commitment was that you would be assigned a people group and were to pray for that group, praying that God would send someone who could present the message of Jesus. So we thought this sounded like a great thing to do as a family, and we adopted an unreached people group, the Dogon People in Mali, West Africa. We as a family, once a week, would have what we called "family night" and part of that included time in the Word and a time of prayer. So during that time of prayer one of us, and typically it was one of the kids, would pray and ask that God would send someone to reach the Dogon People in Mali, West Africa. Well, we did that for several years with no word until one day we received word that God had called a young missionary couple with two small children and one on the way to the Dogon People in Mali, West Africa. It wasn't too long after that we received an e-mail address and were able to correspond with this young couple by the name of Jeff and Faye. This seemed like a fabulous opportunity to talk to our kids about the power of prayer and that God hears us and God answers prayer and we were right on the verge of seeing God do something to reach these people we've been praying for.

Then we received the most unexpected letter. On the day that the house in the village was completed and Jeff and Faye were to move in, Faye contracted a disease and died. She was six months pregnant and the child died with her. Jeff was left with a three year old, a one year old and could do nothing but pack up and go home. And instead of it being a moment where we could celebrate that God answers prayer, I was left with questions like, "Dad, why does God do that?" and, "Where is God in those moments? And, "How do you explain that?" I was left with some of the most difficult questions to explain to our children. To this day I would say, "That makes no sense whatsoever." Everything about the heart of God is to reach lost people. How could you possibly explain that? I would say day in and day out, week after week, year after year, some of the most difficult circumstances we deal with in ministry are related to the circumstances of illness, physical affliction, death, and disease. And we are constantly faced with the question, "Where is God in all this?" and "What sense could this possibly make?"

This is an issue that runs very deeply for me, having grown up in a home where I watched my dad suffer in a bed for over twenty years. I never knew my dad any way but confined to a bed, totally blind, and in my early twenties wrestling with the questions of, "Where's God in all this and what sense could this possibly make?"

This morning we want to talk about this as we move through this series of "Facing our Stuff". There is stuff that gets us caught in life, gets us stuck, and if we don't get unstuck, we start to slip into disappointment and despair. There is no way to answer many of the questions related to the circumstances of disease and illness. But at least we can gain some perspective that might help us avoid getting stuck and continue to process life such as it is.

So if you have a Bible, turn with me to Mark, Chapter 2. Just before we look at that text, keep your finger there, and I want to just remind us of a couple of important things from Genesis, Chapter 3. I feel like, for this whole series, it's important to lay an important foundation that we'll build on. We

know in Genesis, Chapter 3, that Adam and Eve sinned against God and sin separated them from God and brought forth both spiritual death and physical death. We talked about this last week. Physical death is all around us. It's very evident; it's obvious. It's a constant reminder that there is yet a greater death, a spiritual death. Physical death, whether you are talking about 20 years, 40 years, 60 years, 80 years of life, we are all in the process of dying. And in the process of dying, we are awakened to the realities of death in order that we might be awakened to the realities of a greater death, spiritual death, that if it is not dealt with, we will be spiritually dead forever.

In Genesis, Chapter 3, after Adam and Eve sinned and death enters into the picture, God steps forth and makes a promise that one day, through the seed of a woman, would come one who would crush the head of the serpent. In other words God was saying to the devil himself, "*If you think you have won, you're sadly mistaken. At the end of the day, I win. I will do what is necessary to once again bring life out of death. I will make it possible again for people made in my image to dwell forever with me in Paradise" – Chapter 2.* So there was the very beginning of a promise of salvation.

It moves then to a discussion related to the consequences of sin to the man and to the woman. Oftentimes people refer to these as "the curse", but interestingly enough, the text never refers to this as part of the curse. I would suggest to you that's not what it is, but rather these consequences are actually an act of God's grace and mercy. The consequences were that, for women, in the process of the conception, the pregnancy, and the birthing of a child, there would be great pain. To the man there was the reality that he is going to have to fight against creation—the thorns and the thistles and the weeds—in order to bring forth food, in order to sustain life. Now when you think about the world's problems, let me ask you, "Is that what comes to the top of the list?" Some of you ladies may say, "Yes," but it does raise the question, "*Why does God identify those things?"* And the answer is this: "We know from Genesis, Chapter 3, that our greatest temptation is to believe that we can be our own gods. That was the offer made to Adam and Eve. "*You can be your own god. Decide for yourself what's good and evil. Call your own shots; run your own lives, and if you do that, it will be better. You will be happier; you can be your own savior."* If we believe that we can be our own gods, if we can believe that we can be our own savior, if we believe that through our religious goodness we can save ourselves, then we have no hope. God promised to save you; but only those who recognize, "*I need a Savior*" will experience His salvation.

So the consequences to the man and the woman were essentially this: from conception to birth, to the sustaining of life, I'm going to make this a battle. I'm going to make it hard. And the intent of the battle is not to punish you, but it is to knock this idea out of your heads that you can be your own god, because if you don't get that idea out of your head and reach a level of brokenness, you will never experience God's salvation and will be eternally lost. It is not possible to explain all the pain and suffering in the world, but it does allow a framework—to recognize that this life is not heaven. It's not supposed to be. That was messed up in Genesis 3. God has made a commitment to get us back to Genesis 2, but it's not now. The strategy now is to get us to recognize our desperate need for a Savior, that we might experience His salvation, that we might dwell with Him in Paradise forever. So life is hard in order that we might experience His salvation. With that as a foundation, let's go to Mark, Chapter 2, and see how this fleshes out in a familiar story. In Mark, Chapter 1, there are a lot of miracles; there's a lot of stuff going on and it's becoming obvious that Jesus is something more than just another guy.

Chapter 2:

> **And when He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. And being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven."**
> (*NASB, Mark 2:1-5)

A pretty familiar story, Jesus is at home; the crowd has packed in; there's standing room only in the house and even outside there is no way to get access. Along come these four men with their friend who is a paralytic. They cannot get access to Jesus through the door, so they come up with this plan to dig a hole in the roof and drop him down. Now whether you think that was a good plan or not probably depends upon whether you are the paralytic or the homeowner. But either way that was the plan. And so they dropped the paralytic down before Jesus and, in this moment, when I'm sure everyone was wondering what was going to happen, Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven". Now imagine the scene! What do you suppose was the first thing that went through the paralytic's mind? And what was the first thing that went through the four friends' minds? I guess it was something like, "*How's that again? That's not the point"*. I'm going to guess that wasn't even on their radar; that wasn't why they were there. They were there to experience a healing like he had done for so many in Chapter 1. And they had to have looked at each other like, "*What?*" Jesus understood why they were there, but He also understood that this physical disease was a picture of a greater disease, a disease that would last forever, a disease called sin.

Last week we talked about the idea of physical death being in essence a metaphor for spiritual death. When we say that we are spiritually dead, what does that mean? The only real frame of reference we have is to look around us and get some sense of physical death and dying that provides for us a picture of what death means. Physical death is a reminder there is a greater death that has far more significant consequences. In the same way, physical disease is a metaphor for the greater disease of sin. If you want to know the results of being your own god and running your own show and living your life your own way, just look at what physical disease does to life. Look at what it does to every day. Look at what it does to your body; look at the effects of that and you get some picture of what sin does to our souls. That's part of the point; physical disease is a picture of a greater disease. Now the Bible often relates sin to disease. This metaphor is in both the Old and New Testaments.

Oftentimes you'll hear preachers quote Peter when they say, "By His stripes you are healed" and they equate that with, "*If you have enough faith, you are guaranteed that you will be healed of your physical affliction."* And, if you listen, it sounds like what they are saying is that the primary reason Jesus died on the cross is so that your temporary physical affliction will be healed, which is a total misunderstanding of that text. As a matter of fact it's quoting Isaiah 53, and, if you go to the book of Isaiah and track all the way back to chapter 1, in the very first chapter Isaiah says that the greatest disease we face is this disease called sin. And if we do not experience healing from sin, we have no hope. There's no question that by the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, when Isaiah says, "By His stripes you are healed", he is referring, not to the temporary afflictions of this life, but to the ultimate healing of our souls from the damage, the destruction, of sin.

I'm not an expert in AA (Alcoholics' Anonymous); I do know people who I think are. And in talking to them and trying to get some understanding of what that's all about, in this day and age, when people talk about "Step 2 - that they have to seek a higher power," in a world of political correctness, that gets defined very loosely. Whatever that means to you: it could be God, could be a tree, could be a door knob, just *something.* But those who truly understand what the program is about, and take it back to its roots, must understand that was **not** what was meant. Both Bill and Bob were people whose lives had been radically changed by the power of Jesus. The founders of AA, they were very clear that the ultimate disease is self and the ultimate disease is sin, and unless that is dealt with through the power of Jesus, you will drink again. That's what they said. The idea of a higher power was simply to take people who were religiously stuck and get some momentum going. But they would have been the first ones to tell you that if that pursuit of a higher power doesn't end up with a life-changing experience with Jesus Christ, there is no hope. The ultimate disease is sin. And if the ultimate disease is not dealt with, the symptoms will continue to return.

Jesus could have easily healed the paralytic and sent him on his way. I would suggest to you that the paralytic would have gone away worse, rather than better. There was one thing that was driving the paralytic and his four friends to the feet of Jesus and that was his physical suffering. But what drove him to the feet of Jesus resulted in the greatest healing he could have imagined. Well the story goes on.

Verse 6:

> **But there were some of the scribes sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?"** (vs. 6-7)

If you were with us last week, we get another good glimpse of the "older brother", the religious elite. You can't miss the fact that the text says they were "...sitting". Imagine the scene where everybody is packed into this house but there is one group who is seated, those of privilege, the spiritual elite. And they were there to check out this movement to see whether they were going to give it a "thumbs up" or a "thumbs down" and they hear what Jesus says and they reason correctly. We are going to give them credit here; they are correct. Only God has the power to forgive sins... no pastor, no priest, no church, no religion. The privilege belongs to God alone. So they are left with two options. Either this guy is a blasphemer or he is claiming to be God himself. Those are the only two options.

Verse 8:

> **And immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up and pick up your pallet and walk'? But so that that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – He said to the paralytic – 'I say to you, get up, and pick up your pallet and go home." And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone; so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this." And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them.** (vs. 8-13)

Jesus in essence calls them out; He knows what they are thinking. He says, "*Why are you thinking that way? Why are you reasoning that way?"* and then asks them a great question, "Which do you think is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Rise up and walk?' " Now we know the answer to that don't we? It's easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven". Who can prove that? Anybody can say that. I can walk around all day and say, "*Oh, by the way, your sins are forgiven."* How do you know? "*Well I said so."* How are you going to disprove that? But it's in a whole other category when you say to the paralytic, "*Hey, get up and walk".* But then Jesus says something very important; don't miss this. He says, "...**in order that you might know that I have the power to forgive sins."** Watch this! And he says to the paralytic, **"...rise up and walk**".

If you come out of this story saying that the point is if you have enough faith you will be healed of all your diseases, you missed it entirely. That is a total miss. Jesus couldn't have been clearer. The reason He was offering physical healing was to validate His claim that He came to bring about the ultimate healing for the ultimate disease. That's what mattered. Physical afflictions are temporary at best. But the death and destruction of sin is forever, unless you experience the healing power of Jesus. I don't find anywhere in the Bible where God says, "*If you have enough faith He will heal your physical disease".* He may; He may not. But what is all over the Bible is for those who come, desperately in need of a Savior, and ask God for the ultimate healing, God's promise is "*I will always answer that prayer; I will always give you that healing.*"

Verse 14:

> **And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alpheus sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him. And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with the tax collectors and sinners?" And hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."** (vs.14-17)

If you were here last week this probably sounds very familiar. We have another encounter with "*the older brothers".* Jesus calls Matthew, Levi, the tax collector, to follow him and really, in quite a shocking fashion, He calls him to be one of the Twelve. You couldn't imagine anyone in the Jewish community more hated than a tax collector. As a matter of fact, consistently in the New Testament, you have two categories. You have sinners and then a sub-category under that, tax collectors. Somehow they were a category below even the sinners. But Matthew responded. They throw a big party; it's a great party! *The younger son* has returned and the loving father has embraced him. But you have an *older brother* outside, once again very upset by this party, unwilling to come in: the religious leaders, the experts in self-righteousness, those who were determined to be their own god and be their own savior. They are quite upset that Jesus is dining with sinners and tax collectors and raise the question, as they often did. And Jesus' answer is profound, "*Hey, it's not those who are well who need a doctor, it's those who are sick who need a physician."* He didn't come to call the righteous, i.e. *self*-righteous, but the sinners who need a Savior.

Throughout the Gospels you have this problem—the problem between those who recognize they are sinners in need of a Savior, who embraced Jesus as the Great Physician, the only one who could bring healing to the ultimate disease, and those who had convinced themselves they could be their

own saviors. They could be their own gods; they were good enough. *"Thanks, I don't need a doctor, am not sick.*" And consistently we see them on the outside looking in, unwilling to embrace the Savior. Jesus was not saying they are good enough; Jesus was not saying they were righteous. Jesus was saying their self assessment was they weren't sick; their self assessment was they were righteous; therefore they had no need for a Savior.

The greatest temptation all of us face is the temptation to believe we can be our own gods: can run my own show, call my own shots. I can be my own savior. If ultimately we don't reach a point of brokenness and recognize our desperate need for a Savior, we have no hope. And without question it is the difficulties, the challenges, often the physical illnesses and suffering in this life, that bring us to our knees and cause us to realize we need help. Physical disease is in essence a metaphor, a picture of the ultimate disease, and the ultimate disease reminds us we need the ultimate healing that can only come through Jesus Christ.

So what are we saying and what are we not saying? Number 1: what we are **not** saying is if you have a disease, an illness, a physical suffering this morning, it's because of your sin and God is punishing you. We are **not** saying that. Nowhere does the Bible say that. What we **are** saying is because of the fall, because this is a fallen world, because of sin in the world**—**and we have all contributed to that**—**the disease and suffering and physical ailments are part of the journey of this life. Whether you are struggling with those diseases yourself or with someone you love, they remind us that we are not God and that we need help. Is there anywhere in the Bible where God promises that, if you have enough faith, your physical disease will be healed in this life? And the answer is, "*No, there's nowhere where God promises that.*" Does God have the power to heal? Absolutely He does! Should we ask for that? Absolutely we should! No physical disease is hopeless. At any moment God may choose to step in and bring about miraculous healing. You have to believe that. But does that mean God always will? No. Sometimes He will and sometimes He won't.

If the results of pursuing God were always that God heals our afflictions, we would soon all become "older brothers". At that point we are not pursuing God because we love Him; we're not pursuing a relationship with our Savior; we're cutting a deal. We're cutting a deal! "God, I do my part, and you do your part; let's work this out!" At that point we're not pursuing God at all; we're pursuing ourselves. It's just a selfish pursuit using God in the process. We have to understand as Christians, there are no deals; it's not what it's about. It's about faith and trust and understanding that oftentimes there will be circumstances we cannot understand. We just cannot explain; they simply will make no sense. One of the trade-offs we have to accept is, if we believe God is big enough to bring about a physical healing, then with that we have to accept that God is big enough to have purposes for that disease that we cannot possibly understand. If you are going to hold that God is powerful enough to bring about healing, then you have to accept that means that He is also big enough to have purposes beyond your ability to understand. That's the deal; one goes with the other.

Understanding that God has the power to heal helps me to rightly process the struggles and the afflictions of this life. I don't believe there has ever been a moment when God looked down from heaven and saw that we had contracted some disease and said, *"Boy I just didn't see that coming. Wow, I had all these hopes and dreams for Bryan but now he's got this disease and we are going to have to go to plan B; I didn't even see that coming."* That's oftentimes how we think though, isn't it? We get into this, "If only...If only...If only. If only it wasn't this way." We have these ideas of what life would be like if we didn't have this affliction, if we didn't struggle with *this*. But we have to understand, *that life* has never been; it's fantasy. Your story is your story. The fact that you are

struggling with that disease, that isn't an accident. Everything comes through God's filter. Imagining life without *that* is a life that never existed, a life that was never on the books. Your story is your story, such as it is. So I can accept the fact that, on any given day, God could have healed this disease; God still could choose to do that. But if He chooses not to, I accept the fact that for reasons only God can understand, this is my story. This is my life as God has designed it, to fulfill the purpose that God has called me to. It's not a distraction; it's not an interruption; it's part of the story. If you can understand that, the question changes completely. If you think this is an interruption; life could have been *this* without it; now all the hopes and dreams have died; then the question will be, "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" And I am very familiar with those questions.

In my early twenties I was stuck in the web, and that's the question that stuck me. I can tell you this morning, there aren't answers to those questions. It is the question you just have to let go of. But if you can believe that God has created you *on* purpose *for* a purpose and that *your* story is *your* story by God's design, then the question is, "God, how might you use this today to accomplish your purpose in the world? My story is my story, such as it is, and the question is, "OK, God, how might you use this illness, this physical affliction, this limitation today to accomplish your purpose in the world?" That's a very different question!

I can assure you that you will have questions with no answers. I'd love to get to the end of the message and explain to you why Faye died the day they moved into the village to reach an un-reached people group. I don't have a "rest of the story". It makes no sense; it never makes sense to me. I can also assure you there will be times where your physical afflictions or the physical afflictions of someone you love, will push your faith to its limit. I know that; I've been there. But I can assure you, at the end of the day, when you get to the other side, you will know that there was only one healing that ultimately mattered—the one healing from the one disease that lasts forever. And God's promise to each one of us, no matter what our story, no matter what our past, no matter where we've been, is, "If we ask in faith, God promises your sins are forgiven"!

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that when we were dead and lost in the ultimate disease, you gave us forgiveness, not because we earned it, not because we deserved it, but because we asked in faith, believing that Jesus' death on the cross was payment by which you could offer us forgiveness. Lord, I'm sure there are many here this morning who are struggling with the realities of physical afflictions with themselves or people they love. Lord, we know it's hard. We know there are questions that can't be answered. Lord, help us to accept this morning that this is just part of our story; that this life isn't heaven. It isn't supposed to be. But, Lord, because of your promise of ultimate healing, we have the hope of Paradise to come. Lord, we thank you for that...in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Facing Disease

Facing our Stuff – Finding Hope in Our Hurts, Hang-Ups and Habits

Mark 2:1-17

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What have been your experiences as it relates to facing disease in this world? What questions have come out of those experiences?

2. What were the circumstances that brought you to a point of recognizing your need for a Savior?

Bible Study

1. Read Genesis 3:14-18. What did God promise in response to sin? Why is this struggle for man and woman necessary (what is the temptation according to 3:5)?

2. People often quote Isaiah 53:5 (I Peter 2:21-25) "by His stripes you were healed" as if the purpose of Jesus' death on the cross was to heal us of our temporary diseases. Read Isaiah 1:4-6. What is the "disease" from which we need healing according to Isaiah?

3. Read Mark 2:1-17. How does Jesus' response to the paralytic align with Isaiah's message? What is our greatest "disease?"

4. What was the purpose of Jesus physical healing in this story? What is promised and what is not promised regarding sin and physical disease?

5. In what way is physical death a picture of the greater spiritual death and in what way is disease a picture of the greater disease of sin? Why is this important to understand? (2:17)

Application

1. List the top three things you've either learned or been reminded of in this study?

2. How does the truth of this lesson help you process disease and suffering in this world?

3. Often when we or someone we love suffers physically we ask "why?". In light of this study what might be a better question to ask?

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