

thank you

Thank You, Friend: The Power of Personal Encouragement
Group Curriculum
November 13, 2016
Sermon Passage: 2 Timothy 1:3-7
Curriculum Passage: Mark 2:1-5, 10-12

Introduction

I remember meeting a friend of mine named Brian when I was in first grade. We were in the same class, had the same sense of humor, and he was friendly to pretty much everyone. That was about as much as it took to be a friend in first grade. As we grew older, we advanced through elementary school all the way through high school together. The nature of our relationship changed dramatically, just as we changed dramatically as people. The thing that didn't change, though, was that Brian was still my friend. Our conversations were more complex, the questions we asked more introspective and hard to solve. As we went to different colleges in different cities, God poured all sorts of new friendships into each of our lives. We would go a couple of years between the times that we saw one another. Yet, every time we finally did see one another, within a matter of a few moments it was as if we still saw each other every day.

As we became adults, got jobs, got married and had children, the opportunities to see one another became even less frequent – especially since we lived in different states, with lives full of responsibilities. When I started my doctoral studies, part of the benefit of the program was that it meant spending two weeks, twice a year in the same area of town where Brian lives. We always made a point to grab dinner a couple of times during that two-week period. Dinner would always last for at least two hours as we caught up on life. Conversations were no longer about our favorite Saturday morning cartoons like they were when we were kids. We would talk about the hilarious side of marriage, growing into fatherhood, dreams for our careers, and thoroughly humiliating doctor's visits. But we still have the same sense of humor and he's still one of the friendliest, most genuine people I know.

Of all the great things about our friendship, the part that I cherish the most is the fact that talking about my relationship with God with Brian was always natural. We talked freely about the parts of the Bible that didn't make sense to us, what we felt like God wanted us to do with our lives, and even those uncomfortable seasons in which God seemed far from us or silent during hardships we faced. After almost forty years of friendship, Brian continues to add value to my life every time we talk.

When we think about the value of friends in our lives, thankfulness is a natural inclination. The question remains, what do we do with that inclination? Do we ever realize the contribution others have made in our lives? Our passage this week displays the power of friendship to point us toward Christ.

Biblical Background

The Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the Gospel accounts. Like each of the Gospel writers, Mark had a particular target audience. Scholars tell us that Mark's Gospel was written with the persecuted believers in Rome and Italy in mind. With particular interest in the plight of Christians during the horrific persecution under Nero, Mark repeatedly draws out the suffering of Christ in His earthly ministry. Perhaps most significantly, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus reassured the embattled believers as Christian martyrdom, sometimes en masse, was introduced to the Church.

Scholar William Lane, in explaining the gravity of the persecution of Christians in the shape of Mark's gospel, says, "Mark's task was the projection of Christian faith in the context of suffering and martyrdom. If Christians were to be strengthened and the gospel effectively proclaimed it would be necessary to exhibit the similarity of situation faced by Jesus and the Christians of Rome. The Gospel of Mark is a pastoral response to this critical demand." The result for the Roman Christians was discovering that nothing they suffered as followers of Christ was alien to Christ's own experience during His earthly ministry.

Recognizing the pastoral intent of Mark's Gospel is crucial to its understanding. The desperation of the Roman Christians and their constant need of a Savior that rescues, heals, delivers, and saves is reflected in the relentless pace of Mark's style. Jesus is always on the move. The frequently repeated phrases "immediately," "and then next," and the like portray the constant activity of Jesus in a world of brokenness, helplessness, and in need of a miracle. Unlike the other Gospel writers who include introductory material of varying sorts prior to the accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry, Mark records the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the first third of chapter 1. The form of encouragement most needed for those early Christians was the reminder that they serve and love a Savior that is active and alive. Our passage for this week is a reflection of that encouragement.

The Text

By the beginning of Mark 2, Jesus had already gained significant notoriety as a result of His miracles and preaching. Mark 1:28 notes, following the healing of a man with an unclean spirit, that His fame spread everywhere. It's understandable, then, that His return to Capernaum drew a significant crowd.

*"And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them."
(Mark 2:1-2)*

Capernaum was approximately 20 miles from Nazareth. Apparently, upon returning from extended ministry in Galilee, Jesus was living in a home there – presumably that of Peter and Andrew. A normal house in that context would have held no more than about 50 people at its greatest capacity. Everyone else would have had to listen from outside while jammed into the openings of windows and doors. Given the rapid spread of Jesus' renown, the number of those in the crowd would have surely exceeded 50 persons by a wide margin.

After vividly painting the scene for his readers, Mark is certain to point out what the throng of people were so eager to cram into a house for. Specifically, Mark points out that Jesus was preaching the word to them. In our current context, when we refer to preaching or teaching the word, we refer to the Bible. In our passage, though, this is quite early in Jesus' ministry, so there was no formalized body of teaching with regard to the Gospel. What Mark certainly refers to here is the essence of the proclamation that formally began Jesus' ministry in Mark 1:15: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* The preaching focused on the coming reign of God over people's hearts and lives through the conquering of sin.

*"And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay."
(Mark 1:3-4)*

Mark is a master storyteller. After setting the scene and the desperation with which the crowd was trying to get close to Jesus in the first two verses, Mark begins the next sentence with an almost cryptic "and they came...." The reader never knows who "they" are or how they know the man they carried. The fact that they were coming was enough to heighten the tension of the moment. While none of the able-bodied among the crowd were able to get any closer to Jesus than they already were because of the density of the crowd, even more came. Not only did they come, however, they also brought someone on a mat.

The four men must have been friends of the paralytic, proven by their irrepressible mission to get him to Jesus. In that culture, those with grievous infirmity, particularly if it manifested itself in observable ways such as blindness, deafness, or lameness, were outcasts. An exaggeration of Old Testament law had been twisted to the point that those with such infirmities were treated as unclean and sinful. Sin and physical sickness or infirmity were inextricably linked in the mindset of many religious leaders. For these four men to pick up the mat of the paralytic and carry him all the way to Jesus, force an opening in a roof and manually lower him down would have not only been physically demanding to the point of exhaustion, but also a forfeiture of their own cultural standing in the eyes of those who saw them. In this instance, EVERYONE saw them. Their reputations, cultural standing, physical comfort, the monetary sacrifice of fixing the roof they destroyed — nothing was sufficient to keep them from bringing this man to Jesus. When they did, something unexpected and wonderful happened.

*"And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'
(Mark 2:5)*

One of the interesting things about this particular passage is that the paralytic is a somewhat minor character. His friends initiate all the action. The faith of his friends is what Jesus notices. The paralytic is merely the recipient of the blessing. Had his friends not selflessly put aside their own welfare and concerns to cooperate and bring him to Jesus,

such restoration would not have happened. What is more, after this verse, the four men are never mentioned again. There is no thank you or acknowledgment for their act of service.

The response of Jesus to this incredible act of love seems curious initially. One would assume, given the man's current physical condition, that the desired outcome for their effort was the healing of the man's body. After all, Jesus' renown had increased due in large part to the healing work of His ministry. Furthermore, those with physical infirmities were almost certainly doomed to a lifetime of begging in the street as their sole source of provision. These friends were trying to save their paralytic friend from a life of destitution, humiliation, and degradation. So when Jesus proclaims that his sins were forgiven, while that is wonderful, to our reading eyes it can seem like the wrong thing to say.

There are two dynamics at play here. First, the idea of physical healing and the forgiveness of sin is frequently linked throughout the Old Testament (Ps. 41:4; Jer. 3:22; Hos. 14:4). Since the group that Jesus is addressing is heavily Jewish, His remarks are tied to those presuppositions. As the following verses (Mark 2:6-9) make clear, Jesus was using this opportunity to make a very clear assertion about His identity as God in the flesh. It was widely known that only God can forgive sins, so the declaration that the paralytic's sins were forgiven was no veiled proclamation by Jesus.

The second dynamic has to do with the nature of healing. The friends brought the paralytic to be physically healed, but what Jesus immediately offered was spiritual healing. The clear principle is that what draws us to Jesus – the felt need – is often only a pathway to what we genuinely need. Jesus' seemingly inappropriate response to the act of the friends was actually the grandest of fulfillments of the healing they sought.

*“But 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, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.’”
(Mark 2:10-11)*

Verse 10 occurs on the heels of a tense exchange with the scribes regarding Jesus' public forgiveness of the paralytic's sin. The scribes, realizing Jesus' claim to be God, had begun to accuse Him of blasphemy. Jesus' response to them was with regard to which sign of His divinity would be easier – forgiving sin (spiritual healing) or healing the paralytic's lameness (physical healing). This is yet one of the many questions that Jesus asked of His critics to which they had no answer. Certainly spiritual healing was the greater act, but the physical healing was much more obvious and tangible. Without giving them a chance to answer, Jesus does both.

There is a significant shift of addressee in this passage. Jesus moves from His rhetorical rebuke of the scribes to a personal address to the paralytic. Jesus makes His identity known to the paralytic through his tremendous healing. True to Mark's form, he addresses the whole gamut of the concerns of those persecuted early Christians in the manner in which he recounts this episode from Jesus' ministry. He both reveals that Jesus is precisely who He claims to be – God the Son – through the ability to forgive sin, as well as the dominion of Jesus over the pain and suffering of the physical world.

*“And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”
(Mark 2:12)*

The irrefutable evidence of the truth of Jesus’ claim was the formerly paralytic man packing up and going home. This act ties to the Old Testament prophecies that the coming of the Kingdom of God would include the lame walking (Is. 35:6; Jer. 31:8). Jesus taught the coming of the Kingdom of God at the beginning of chapter 2 and closes our passage by demonstrating the coming of the Kingdom of God. Sandwiched in between those two moments were the claims that He Himself is God and the source of all healing.

The last part of verse 12 is a shout of utter amazement: “We never saw anything like this!” A greater understatement there could not be. What is more, none of them would have been able to shout of what they had seen had four friends not picked up the corners of a mat and carried their helpless friend to Jesus.

The Text in Life

As we begin the focus on the season of Thanksgiving, it is right and appropriate to consider those special people that God has brought into our lives with the purpose of using them to take us to Jesus, so to speak. None of us are called to walk the path of a believer alone. In fact, none of us started the path of a believer alone. At some point, someone was instrumental in pointing us to Christ. As we consider the beauty of the sacrificial act in this passage, here are some points of application we can consider.

First, it is important that we remember those that God has uniquely placed in our lives as instruments through which God draws us to Himself. The reason it is important to remember those special people is that it is extremely easy to, like the four friends in our passage, allow those people to fade into the past. Those significant people could come from any sphere. They could be parents, friends, teachers, group leaders, mentors, coworkers, or teammates. Whatever the sphere, have you ever thought what a source of encouragement it would be to those people to know what a great spiritual impact their life has made on yours?

Second, in remembering those who have impacted us, it is challenging for us to prayerfully consider whom we can make a similar impact on. Impact at that level is intentional in nature. If we are not mindful of how God wants to use us in the lives of those around us, it is way too easy to get lost in the to-do list of tomorrow. Spend some time this week making note of those you regularly connect with. What can you discern about where they are spiritually? How can you encourage them? In what ways can you demonstrate the love of Christ to them?

Third, we can consider the preparations we can make so that we are able to serve our friends in ways similar to the friends in this episode of Jesus’ ministry. Specifically, their carrying their friend to Jesus came at a great cost to them. There was the obvious expenditure of time and physical strength just to complete the task. There was the financial sacrifice that would have been inherent in destroying someone’s property. There was the

status sacrifice in that culture of being seen carrying an invalid on a pallet. As we consider the tremendous cost to them, the magnanimity of the act only grows. The question remains for us, what would we be willing to do to point our friends to Christ? How can we position ourselves so that we can make those sacrifices? Is there enough margin in our lives for such acts of ministry?

As we near a time of year that is characterized by thanksgiving, one of the greatest blessings we can offer others is acknowledging their great blessing in our lives. There are many ways to do so. The most important decision we can make in the process is to make expressing our thankfulness to our friends a priority that is not lost.

Discussion Questions

1. Who was the earliest friend you can remember having? How did they make an impact on your life and why?
2. When was the last time someone shocked you with his or her generosity toward you? How did you express your thanks?
3. What people were the most influential in introducing you to Jesus? What about those that have contributed to your growth since then?
4. How naturally does it come to you to sincerely thank people for their contribution to your life?
5. What is the best “thank you” you’ve ever received? What made it so special?