

May 29, 2011

THE SECRET [NOTE: *Two of our church members passed into heaven on the weekend of May 29; therefore, I preached “off the cuff” on May 29. This sermon was actually delivered on June 4 with minor changes.*]

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We love a good parade, and any occasion will do. One of the great things about Harris County is that we have six traffic lights and four Christmas parades. That sounds like a pretty good ratio to me! Here we are on Memorial Day weekend, and perhaps some of you will be attending a parade tomorrow or having a special time with your family. We do want to show our gratitude for those who paid the ultimate price for our freedom.

Now, I want you to imagine being in Savannah, Georgia, in January of 1960. All through town there’s a buzz of excitement because a parade is coming. There are musicians and singers and all manner of festivities.

A Jan. 17, 1960, article and photo essay in the *Savannah Morning News Magazine* captured the intense scene of [Sweet Daddy] Grace’s last visit to the city before he died.

“There was always the West Broad street parade, with Daddy riding regally in one of his Cadillacs, preceded by brass bands and surrounded by his handmaidens in long, bright gowns. Flowing robes, a mane of grey curly hair, long claw-like fingernails, and an oddly painted mustache gave Grace the appearance of a potentate from a strange land.”<sup>1</sup>

Some of you may remember Sweet Daddy Grace, who founded the United House of Prayer for All People. Even if you don’t, the short description above gives you an idea of the charismatic nature of the individual. Sweet Daddy Grace founded churches in many cities; and in each city he had a church, he built or bought a mansion. Within his churches, he set up small groups whose goal was to raise money; and the groups would compete to see who would raise the most. At each service, there would be several offerings; and the ushers would compete to see who could gather the most in their plates. The winners might get to sit near Sweet Daddy Grace when he came to visit. And the whole ministry was built on the idea that Sweet Daddy Grace had special healing powers. He used his alleged powers to build himself a kingdom.

I say all that this morning by reason of contrast. This brings us to Mark 1. Let’s look this morning at the story of the leper in verses 40–45:

<sup>40</sup> *And there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.*

<sup>41</sup> *And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean.*

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Clark Felty, “The Legacy of ‘Sweet Daddy Grace’ Lives On.” *Savannah Morning News*, 24 September 2007. Available at <http://savannahnow.com/news/2007-09-24/legacy-sweet-daddy-grace-lives>.

<sup>42</sup> *And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed.*

<sup>43</sup> *And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away;*

<sup>44</sup> *And saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man: but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.*

<sup>45</sup> *But he went out, and began to publish it much, and to blaze abroad the matter, insomuch that Jesus could no more openly enter into the city, but was without in desert places: and they came to him from every quarter.*

I want to draw your attention to this leper. Now, a leper was an outcast. The disease itself caused the individual who had it to suffer disfigurement, and so it was obvious when a person had contracted the illness; and such people were not supposed to come near healthy individuals. They were to remain at a distance. This leper approached Jesus and knelt before Him. Notice what He says: “If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.” Did he mean, “Jesus, if you feel like it today, if you’re in a good mood, you can help me”? No, of course not. He meant that if it were within God’s will, He could heal. He meant that so long as it will not violate God’s purpose in his life, Jesus could heal Him.

This is important to us today because the faith healers tell people that they have to “claim” the healing. They have to believe that it has already been accomplished, and if they truly believe, then they’ll be healed. If they aren’t healed, they have a lack of faith. But this man didn’t “claim” any healing or order Jesus to heal him. He said, “If it’s Your will” and Jesus did not rebuke Him for that. My purpose today is not to denigrate faith healers but to simply say, “Look at the record. Compare how Jesus acts and reacts to the teachings we hear from these faith healers.” To paraphrase the apostle John, “Don’t believe every spirit but test the spirits.”

This man asked Jesus to heal him. Do you see what Jesus did here? He reached out and touched him! He touched the leper! Luke, in describing this leper, tells us that he was in a fairly advanced stage of leprosy. He “had it bad.” I doubt very many of us would have wanted to touch him just because the effects of leprosy are so disgusting; but for a Jew, it was unthinkable—especially for a Jewish rabbi! Touching a leper made a person unclean, and that’s something Jews just didn’t do. Jesus *did* reach out and touch him, though. After He touched the leper, He spoke those wonderful words: “I will: be thou clean.” The man was instantly and perfectly healed.

But then Jesus did something we would not expect. He didn’t make a big deal out of it; in fact, He “straitly charged” the man to tell no one but the priests. You see, according to the Law, a person who somehow was cured of leprosy had to go to the priests for inspection, and the priests would conduct certain tests and do certain rituals before declaring that person to be clean. Do you know when the last time someone had been healed of leprosy in Scripture before this man? It was Naaman, during the days of Elisha the prophet. Naaman wasn’t even a Jew! But, as far as we know from Scripture, Naaman was the last person to be healed of leprosy. Do you think the priests were really all that familiar with their exact duties relating to leprosy? I doubt it. In my mind I see them opening scrolls of Leviticus and trying to read about exactly what they were supposed to do. And can you imagine the discussion among the priests? “Well, what is this? Someone healed of leprosy?” And don’t you think this would point the priests to a great truth about the Healer?

We don’t use those words “straitly charged” anymore. They’re worth discussing. The word “strait”

spelled S-T-R-A-I-T has to do with being narrow, tight or disciplined. It's the same word which Jesus uses to describe the "strait" gate. We also use it for a narrow passage of water, such as the Straits of Magellan. In other words, there's no "wobble room" here in Jesus' instructions. This man was to go first to the priests and show them his new condition. He was not to go to anyone else first. His job was to go to the priests so that the priests could see what had happened. This healing was a benefit for this man physically, but it was meant for a sign to the priests spiritually. In other words, the healing was for a greater benefit than just this man's sake. And Jesus made it very clear that he was to go directly to the priests—do not pass GO, do not collect \$200.

Some of you who are teachers or who have been around kids know how this works. You know, you TELL the kids what to do, you SHOW them how to do it, you have them WORK TOGETHER and INDIVIDUALLY on the assignment, you monitor their progress and do your best to make sure everyone understands what to do. You make it a point to repeat that the thing is due TOMORROW. You ask three or four of the kids, "When is this due?" "Tomorrow!" "When is this due?" "Tomorrow!" "When is this due?" "Tomorrow!" You make everything as explicit as possible. So then you know what happens: some kids don't have it done, and you ask them, "What happened?" Some kids will say, "I didn't hear you say that," and others will say, "I didn't know how to do it." Am I right?

Well, unfortunately, this man did not listen to Jesus; and much good that could have been done in the lives of the priests was thwarted, and Jesus' ministry was obstructed. He goes on his merry way and starts telling everyone what Jesus had done for him. He did not go directly to the priests. He did not do what Jesus had explicitly told him to do! *His feelings were more important than Jesus' instructions.* Oh, church, let us not heap judgment upon this man too harshly for we do the same thing! We put our feelings before anything else: before the feelings and needs of others, before the concerns of those in authority over us, before even the authority of God's Word. We can live by our feelings and believe we are doing God's work when in fact we are frustrating God's people and God's work.

If there is anything that defines the twenty-first century church, it is our *demand* to live according to our feelings. Church has to make me "feel good," the music has to make me "feel good," the sermon has to make me "feel good." Now, when a church is operating properly, yes, we have that sweet fellowship with Jesus and the Holy Spirit and with each other and we will feel good. If our hearts are out of fellowship, if there is some sin at work in our lives, then we won't feel good until we get it right. That's not what I mean. What I mean about the modern church is that there's little emphasis on holy living, of having our hearts right before God, of getting rid of the sin in our lives; instead, we go to church to get a boost. We want to generate a feeling that is at best artificial because it's not built on the true foundation of being right with God. It's built on our emotions and our self-esteem and our own sense of personal goodness. That is why in so many churches now the music is all about how much I love God and how much God means to me—with little real content or substance. The sermons are lively and engaging but very often without even a passing reference to Scripture. You can make any church grow with an agenda like that because no real commitment is ever required.

But even in a little church that is trying to adhere to the Gospel we can get wrapped up in things emotionally and miss what we are supposed to do. We can get emotionally attached to a certain way of doing things, or an idea of how we think things ought to be done. The pastor of the Methodist church across the street told of a time when he was in a new church (well, new to him) and he was conducting communion. Apparently he did it a little differently than the people of that church were used to doing it. After the service, two ladies asked for appointments to talk to him the next day. The first one said to him that the way he had done the communion was wonderful and she loved it and was blessed by it.

The next lady came in and said that if he ever did communion that way again, she was leaving the church!

[INSERT “God Help the Preacher” by Rick Lipp (*Harris County Journal*, 2 June 2011)]:

If he preaches quietly he’s not spiritual enough.  
If he preaches loud he’s way too harsh.  
If he laughs at things funny he’s not serious enough.  
When he doesn’t laugh he’s far too serious.  
If he used notes he’s evidently not studied enough. [*didn’t make notes?*]  
But if notes are used he is too formal.  
If he visits during the day, he should be at the office so folks can find him studying and praying.  
If he visits in the evening he is up to something sneaky and ought to be at home with his family.  
If he preaches against sin he is meddling.  
If he preaches on love he is compromising.

So here’s this leper, doing exactly what Jesus has just told him not to do, feeling good about doing it. And what is the result? First, the priests do not get the testimony that Jesus had intended for them to have. He wanted those priests to search the Scriptures, because in doing so they would have found Him there. This was a chance early in Jesus’ ministry to reach a group of people who would become increasingly difficult to reach. Second, the masses of people, on hearing this man’s testimony, turned out in such numbers that Jesus could not carry on His preaching ministry in the cities. He had to stay out in the wilderness, and even then the people came in droves. They came, not to hear Him preach, but to have Him change their circumstances. Some people missed the chance to hear Jesus preach about changing their hearts; instead, they focused only on His ability to change their circumstances.

Now what does this have to do with Sweet Daddy Grace and others like him? Remember first of all that Jesus healed, not because the leper demanded or had enough faith, but because it was Jesus’ decision to do so; and that healing was intended to be instructional not just for the leper but for a whole group of other people not related to the leper. God does allow us to go through difficulties and trials, and those trials always have a purpose even if we don’t see or understand that purpose. Your suffering may very well be intended to show others the work of God in ways you may never fully see. And a lack of healing is not a lack of faith. It instead means that God is not yet finished doing in your life what He intends to do, whether for your sake or someone else’s.

Second, Jesus did not intend for the leper’s healing to bring Him fame and fortune. Jesus did not buy a mansion in every city in Palestine, nor did he enter each city with shouting bands and a bevy of handmaidens and a golden chariot. He didn’t establish rivalries to see who could gather the most money for Him. That’s not how He operates.

Third, we can operate according to our feelings and think we are doing God a favor when in reality we are acting in disobedience and making obstacles to God’s work in the lives of others. This leper, I’m sure, did not *intend* to hinder the work of Jesus; but nevertheless, he did hinder it! There are a thousand ways we can live according to our feelings and be out of step with God’s program.

We are going to see throughout Mark that Jesus continues this pattern: He expels demons without letting them speak of His true nature; He heals people but tells them to keep it a secret. He is the Messiah, but He has what seems to be a paradoxical method of trying to keep it a secret. We will explore this theme as we search through this incredible book.

Today was not a message about salvation from sin *per se*; yet we have pointed to the fact that Jesus came to deliver us from sin's oppression. His desire was to preach to people so that they could be transformed from the inside out, which is permanent and eternal; yet all too many people focused on how He could transform their exterior problems and circumstances, which are temporary. Friends, Jesus came to give us eternal healing, eternal life, eternal glory and joy. It may be that you feel like your greatest need is healing of the body, but Jesus came to heal our souls. Will you accept His healing today?