

"A LESSON FROM THE BIBLE"

BIBLE LESSON

The sermon this morning is more like a Bible lesson than a sermon, and I'd like to begin by reading to you a very short story taken from the Gospel according to St. Mark. In fact, this particular story may be the shortest story in the entire Bible for it takes only three verses to tell it.

"And immediately Jesus left the synagogue, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him of her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them....."

DEVELOPMENT

Nothing, I suppose, could be more straightforward than that. It was Saturday, and Saturday as you know was the Sabbath. Jesus had spent the greater part of the day in the synagogue - teaching, preaching and healing. At the end of the day, he went to the home of his very close friend Peter. Peter's brother, Andrew, and two of their very close friends, James and John, accompanied them. Now Peter was a young married man, and his wife's mother was living with them. As they drew near to the house, they learned that Peter's mother-in-law was not feeling very well. Her condition is described to us as that of a woman sick with a fever. Anyway, they mentioned this to Jesus when he arrived, and naturally he was concerned, and went to see her immediately. The moment she saw him she felt much better. In fact, from reading between the lines, we gather that within a few minutes she was back on her feet serving them supper. A very simple story, and yet it tells us a great deal about Jesus.

Before we proceed any further in our discussion of this particular event in the life of our Lord, let me just make this one observation. Personally I don't think there's anything in this story that's beyond the realm of our own normal experience. That is to say this, that all of us have known people who were sick, and who responded to the presence of a powerful personality coming into the room so that somehow (beyond our understanding) pressures are relieved, and physical energies are stimulated, and a healing miracle takes place.

COMPARISON OF ACCOUNTS

But now getting back to our Bible lesson, since this is a Bible lesson, I thought that it would be interesting to compare St. Mark's account of what took place with the interpretations given us in the other three gospels. Mark's gospel, as you know, is generally recognized by the Bible scholars to be the earliest of the four gospels, and that's why we took Mark as our starting point. Matthew tells this same story only with one or two slight differences. To begin with, he uses fewer words. Mark tells the story in 62 words, and Matthew uses only 36. And then this too, although this doesn't have any great religious significance either, Mark is always the narrator, and he takes time with his narratives. Matthew and Luke are interested in other things, and they often leave out the narrative details which increase the vividness of Mark's story. Also in Matthew's gospel, the story is set in a different context. Instead of coming at the end of a day in the synagogue, it comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, and it is preceded by the story of two other healings. And then finally, in Matthew's story our attention is concentrated on Jesus entirely. No mention is made of Andrew, James and John. They've been left out of the story altogether.

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one by one, lifting them up one by one. I suppose there is no other way. It was his ability to know what people were going through and to meet them at the point of their greatest need that made people remember him. It was this genuine interest in the individual person that drew the people to him. What an inspiration his personality can be to us!

JESUS HAD A SPIRITUAL POWER THAT PEOPLE FELT AND RESPONDED TO.

And finally, the third thing that the story reveals to us is this:

Jesus had a unique spiritual power that the people felt and responded to. This power was his because he lived so very close to God. There are times when we stand by the bedside of people we love, people who are suffering a great deal and our hearts go out to them, and yet our hands are so helpless. We can do nothing. But not so with Jesus. He saw a woman who had a physical disability and his heart went out to her, and he took her by the hand and he lifted her up. You can almost feel the power of it. You can't describe it. It can't be put into words. You can't understand it, but you can feel it. They felt it, and in so doing great things happened inside of them.

THE SUMMARY.

These then are just three of the things that this story tells us about Jesus. First: it shows us Jesus sharing in the home life of one of his friends. Second: it points up the great interest he had in the individual person. Third: it reminds us of the spiritual power that was his.

Some of you may feel that these stories about Jesus, this one, and the one we discussed together last week, may have been greatly exaggerated. This may be the case. I imagine that as these stories circulated among the early Christians they were enlarged. As you compare this one story in the gospels you can almost see this process of growth and enlargement taking place. I imagine that these stories were told out of sheer admiration for Jesus, and probably some of them were exaggerated, but this doesn't alter the fact that here was a man of tremendous spiritual power, a man with a spiritual vitality that was almost unthinkable and unimaginable, a man with the power to set people back on their feet, and turn them upside down (or perhaps we should say right side up), a man with the power to move the entire world away from the cross. And people, as they have felt the impact of this power, have said something like this, - this is the power of God working in the world. This power that was in Jesus, this is the power of God among us and running right through the entire created order.

This power is here right now, in this place, and this is where our Bible lesson comes to an end, and this, I suppose is where it always must come to an end, right here with you. This power is among you at this moment, and you, like Peter's mother in law, may be troubled with a fever. It may be a feverish anxiety, not knowing just what's going to happen to you in the next few weeks or months. It may be a feverish fear, growing out of something that's happening physical inside of you. It may be a feverish remorse, wishing that you hadn't done something that has put a blot on your life and perhaps on the life of some other person too. It may be a feverish resentment against someone who has wronged you. And as we come to the end of another sermon, let me leave you with this one thought: let this Christ-spirit move into that feverish area in your life - as you picture his personality, and as you feel his spirit moving in the pages of the Gospel. Let him touch that fever that's troubling you, and see what happens. For just as he came and took Simon Peter's mother in law by the hand and lifted her up and rebuked her fever, so he can do the same for you!

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LET US PRAY:

Come to us our Father in these moments and touch our fevered spirits. Take away our fears. Dissolve our doubts. Take away our remorse and resentment that we may rise to our feet and do thy will.

Amen.

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We find that Luke also tells this story in his gospel, and in so doing makes three significant changes. FIRST of all, the fever that Mark and Matthew both refer to becomes a "great" fever in Luke. (The emphasis is upon the word "great") And then SECOND, where Mark says "Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up", Luke says, "He stood over her and rebuked the fever". And then third, at the end, when she gets up to minister to them, she gets up "immediately". (The emphasis here is upon the word "immediately"). In other words, you can see this story gradually becoming enlarged. The disease is more serious, the cure is more immediate, and the one who heals the disease is more supernatural in his authority over the powers which have caused the disease. Generally speaking this is true of Luke's interpretation.

Now having gone so far, and remembering what I said about this being a Bible lesson, having gone so far in comparing accounts in three of the gospels, it's only natural now to turn to the fourth gospel, to the gospel of St. John. We spend time looking through the pages of his gospel, and not being able to find this particular episode recorded, we come to the conclusion that it's not there. We're correct in this assumption. Just as we cannot find the Lord's Prayer, or the Sermon on the Mount, or any of the parables, so we are unable to find this particular story. Perhaps you begin to wonder about this, and you come to the conclusion, if you read John Gospel carefully in the light of the other three, that John is attempting to do something entirely different in his gospel. John is trying not so much to tell the story of Jesus' ministry, as he is to meditate upon the meaning of that story. I'd put it this way: Mark is primarily interested in telling what Jesus did. Matthew and Luke are primarily interested in telling us what Jesus said. And John is interested in pondering upon the meaning of who Jesus was. John may have known about this story, and then again he may not have known about it. If he did know about it, he left it out because it didn't serve his general purpose and scheme.

This then is the first point in the Bible lesson. If we're going to read our Bibles with understanding, then we need to read them critically and carefully, as well as piously and devotionally. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible is not the "dictated" word of God. You cannot take a brace of words, so to speak, out of the Bible and put them on a sheet of paper and say, "This is the word of God". You cannot take a passage out of the Bible and say, "This is what the Bible says". For instance, if you take this story about Peter's mother in law and quote it word for word as the words of God, which version do you quote? And so just to bring this point to a head, in the Gospels you find four different men, all devout and ardent followers of Jesus, drawing on all of the available material about Him, oral as well as written - selecting it, changing it, rearranging it - each to suit his own purpose, and the best way and perhaps the only way ~~to~~ to understand any part of it is to see it in the light of the whole.

WHAT DOES THIS PARTICULAR
STORY TELL US ABOUT JESUS

With these few thoughts in the background, suppose we move on then to the more important part of this Bible lesson. I think that all of us at one time or another have been anxious to know more about Jesus, and in order to know more about Him we must turn to the Bible where we can trace the original outline of his personality. This particular story reveals to us three aspects of his character, and these I would touch upon very briefly.

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SHARING IN THE HOME
LIFE OF HIS FRIENDS

The first thing that catches our attention here is that here we have a glimpse of Jesus sharing in the home life of his friends. Actually, we know very little about the home life of Jesus. We do know that when he was about twenty-nine or thirty he left his own home in Nazareth, and during the few years that followed, he really didn't have a home of his own. It may be that Peter's home served as his headquarters during his ministry in Galilee. But at any rate, we're grateful for the scenes that we have here and there in the gospels that show us Jesus sharing in the home life of his friends. Because of this, we seem to know him better. For instance, Mary and Martha often entertained him in their home in Bethany just outside of Jerusalem. And then on one occasion, a tax collector, called Levi gave a party for him that he enjoyed very much. And then on another occasion, when Jesus wanted to see Zaccheus on a very important matter, he had a meal in his house. This story about Peter and his mother in law is a story about Jesus in the home of one of his friends. The story suggests to us that Jesus was not some kind of a fanatic or hermit removed from the normal day to day life of normal human beings. Undoubtedly he knew something about the frictions and disturbances that sometimes creep into our home life. He was a man, born and raised in a family, and at the end of a long working day, he often turned to the home of one of his many friends for companionship, rest and refreshment.

This particular aspect of his personality leads one to make this observation, that if a man is going to make anything out of his life that he is going to have to do it in the context of his own human relationships. It's something for us to remember. So often we're tempted to say to ourselves:

"Oh...if only I could get away from my family. If only I didn't have to work with that person or under that employer... If only John J. nes wasn't on that committee... If only my in laws would stay away...."

Don't ever say that. In other words, the implication is this that the only salvation or the only success (if you will) that ever comes to a person comes right in the context of human relationships - not in spite of them, but because of them!

A GREAT INTEREST IN
THE INDIVIDUAL PERSON

The second thing that catches our attention in this incident is that once again, as is so often the case, we see Jesus displaying his great interest in the individual person. Jesus had that rare ability to concentrate on a person of no great importance in the eyes of the world, and to bring out the very best in that person. We see this happening time and again in the pages of the Gospels. To be sure, there were times when he was concerned with the crowds. The time, for instance, when he fed the five thousand people. And we know this too that in the early days of his ministry, the crowds followed around after him. But when you come right down to it, he dealt with people one by one...the rich young ruler who wanted to become one of his disciples, the sinning woman whom he befriended, the man whose little girl was dying, the woman who was a widow who had lost her son, the thief dying on the cross.

In this story, we see Jesus focussing all of his attention upon a woman of no great significance except that she was a relative of one of his close friends, and we get the impression that he approached people

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