

Desperate Thieves and Divine Justice
Mark 5:25-34

The story of the woman with the issue of blood who comes to Jesus and is healed through her faith in him is fairly familiar to most of us. We hear her story and we marvel at her faith and her courage. We stand in awe at the miraculous working of Christ' power in her life. And very often we come away from her story with our own feelings of longing that maybe someday we might have as much faith as she had to receive as much grace from Jesus as she received.

It is to that longing, to that wish that somehow God might act in our day and in our lives as He did then, that I want to speak this morning. A real problem exists when we, 2000 years after the events we read of in the gospels, try to figure out why we can't have it like they did back then. There are a number of factors what contribute to our dissatisfaction with Jesus and the way He works in our lives today as to how He apparently worked in people's lives in the days He walked the shores of Galilee. Primary among those factors is our ignorance of the prevailing historical reality and our tendency to romanticize the people and events surrounding Jesus.

Let me give you a specific example of what I mean. I shared an essential detail of this message with my wife, Linda, who immediately rejected it, and warned me that if I pursued that line of thinking, all of you would stop listening. Now, the reason she predicts you will stop listening is because I am about to tell you something about this narrative, about this scene in Jesus' life, about this woman, in fact, that you probably have never heard before.

You see, it is likely that any time you have heard about this woman, she has been presented as a desperate victim of a condition and culture she is powerless to change. She has a disease that steals her energy, her joy, her position in the community, and through ineffective medical treatments, her wealth and prosperity. Her person and her purse are equally drained and the best we can say of her is that she is desperate, and having heard of Jesus, gathers enough faith to sneak up behind Him in a crowd and take what she needs.

We pity her. We mourn with her. We rejoice in the gift she receives. But, mostly, we miss the point of the entire story. You see, this woman and her faith are not the hero of the story. Jesus is. This woman and her faith –in the historical context in which this event happens– **this woman is not a hero but a desperate, guilty, lawbreaking thief!** If you'll look closely with me at what Mark records here, you will find that not only is she is lawbreaker, she knows it!

Mark tells us that the woman had been dealing with this hemorrhage for twelve years. He tells us that she had suffered greatly. He tells us that all her efforts to get help for herself were not helping, and were, in fact, making her situation worse.

He tells us that the woman heard the reports about Jesus. He tells us that she came up behind Him and touched His garment. He tells us what she was thinking, what motivated her to touch Him. And Mark tells us that the woman's effort was successful, that immediately upon touching Jesus' garment she was made whole.

But here is what Mark does not tell us, because he knows that anyone familiar with Israel at this time period would already know these things. He does not tell us that the woman's idea about touching Jesus garment is a common statement of superstition at the time. Which means, given how this woman approaches Jesus anonymously, she may have faith in the superstition, but not necessarily in Jesus Himself. She may have approached this whole endeavor more in a spirit of magic than religious faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Mark also does not spell out for us a more fundamental consideration. He does not spell out for us the specific laws this woman breaks as she comes to Jesus.

Leviticus 15:19-31 ¹⁹ "When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. ²⁰ And everything on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean. Everything also on which she sits shall be unclean. ²¹ And whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ²² And whoever touches anything on which she sits shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ²³ Whether it is the bed or anything on which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening. ²⁴ And if any man lies with her and her menstrual impurity comes upon him, he shall be unclean seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.

²⁵ "If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstrual impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness. As in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean. ²⁶ Every bed on which she lies, all the days of her discharge, shall be to her as the bed of her impurity. And everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her menstrual impurity. ²⁷ And whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ²⁸ But if she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count for herself seven days, and after that she shall be clean. ²⁹ And on the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest, to the entrance of the tent of meeting. ³⁰ And the priest shall use one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her before the LORD for her unclean discharge.

³¹ "Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst."

She willing breaks God's Law to serve her own self-interest. This is the essence of sin. She may be desperate, and we may rightly want to extend mercy.

Proverbs 6:30-31 (ESV) ³⁰ People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry, ³¹ but if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold; he will give all the goods of his house.

The fact remains, she is a thief who has taken something that does not belong to her. She has taken it without asking, under unlawful conditions, for her own benefit, and without regard for her target. **She is a desperate thief.**

We need to not miss this by making her the hero of her own healing, and Jesus just the innocent bystander, the passive source for her active faith.

We are saying nothing more about this woman in this occasion that we must say about ourselves. We are all, outside of grace, desperate thieves. We are sinners who take the blessings of life and the world around us, blessings that do not belong to us, and we use what we take for our own benefit without regard for God or His law. We take without asking. We take without offering thanks. We take on our terms for our own self-interest, and we do this because we are broken and corrupt and we cannot help ourselves or save ourselves.

How do we do this? How do we take from God without asking, like thieves and lawbreakers? How about our society's current attitude toward sex without commitment, sexual relationships and pleasures outside the boundaries set by God our Creator?

How about the way we treat marriage, a gift God arranged, a covenant that God invests Himself in and that belongs to Him, but we steal it and offer it to anyone who wants it, and provide divorce as a convenient means for avoiding His prescription for enduring relationships that exemplify His existence as Trinity?

How about the way we consume resources without gratitude? Or how we advance our social and political agenda without concern for how they affect the revelation of His image and glory in the world?

***Psalm 24: 1 The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,***

The Bible asserts that everything in this world, including its people, belong to God, but how often do we treat the world and its people as if it belongs to us and exists solely to serve our needs and interests? Everything we do that takes for granted God's legal ownership of what He has created for His own glory makes us thieves no matter how desperate we are for our quality of life or even for our own survival. Lawbreaking is sin and the wages of sin is death. Period.

This woman knows this. How do I know? Look at her responses. She sneaks up in the crowd. She takes without asking. She delays identifying herself. She takes the position of the guilty. She presents with fear and trembling. She tells Jesus the whole truth meaning she confesses her sin! When we set all our romantic ideas aside, we find this woman is just like all the rest of us, a sinner with a need only Jesus can meet.

At this point all eyes are on Jesus, which is just what Mark wants for the story. **Here is the key question: "How will Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, respond to a guilty lawbreaker?"** That is the question every single one of us brings to Jesus every minute of every day and in the

case of every decision we make and every action we take. We are sinners, desperate thieves, who are reaching out for mercy. What will we receive from Jesus? What should we hope for?

Here is the entire point of Mark's gospel. Jesus offers this woman, this one desperate thief, this one guilty lawbreaker who represents us all, four amazing graces.

- He offers her first the unconditional love of an intimate family relationship. "Daughter."
 - Used of no one else in the gospels
 - Restoration in the covenant community
 - Restoration to the redemptive relationship with God
- Second, he upholds the value of faith in Him.
 - He does not correct her theology or address her superstition
 - He approves her faith
 - Faith the size of a mustard seed is still faith
 - **Faith that sets the certainty of all hope in Jesus is faith enough**
- Third, He sets the course of her life moving forward. "Go in peace."
 - **Isaiah 26:3 (ESV) ³ You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.**
 - "Go in peace" not only prevents others from hassling her for her audacity, it guides her personal processing of the event.
 - She has gained peace of heart and mind from Jesus
 - The more she focuses her thinking and actions on Him the more peace will accompany the course of her life
- Finally, He establishes His authority to set the condition of the rest of her life.
 - **Romans 8:1 (ESV) ¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.**
 - **Galatians 5:1 (ESV) ¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**

A final thought. Jesus offers mercy and compassion to a desperate thief. Why? Why does He seem to ignore her sin, her lawbreaking? If we are to see in Jesus the full revelation of the Person of God the father, then where is the holiness? Where is the righteousness? Where is the justice?

This woman took something from Jesus and He added mercy to it, but He also took something from her. He took her sin, her guilt, her shame. He took her lawbreaking upon Himself and hung it in His body on the cross. Her sin, your sin, my sin He takes upon Himself and nails them to the cross. **We get His mercy because He takes our sin, our guilt, and the punishment we deserve. He experiences the fullness of God's justice so that we might experience the fullness of God's mercy.**

Not only does Jesus deal with the illness of this desperate thief. Not only does He affirm her faith and forgive her sin, He takes her place before the throne of God, and receives in Himself on the cross everything her lawbreaking deserves from a righteous and holy God. He deals not only with her felt need, but with her real need as well.

Do you know Jesus like this? Do you know him not only as mercy but as sacrifice and substitute?

Do you know Him not only as One from Whom we receive blessings in this world, but as the One who saves you from the wrath of God in the world to come by His personal sacrifice on your behalf?

Dear Desperate Thieves, Jesus offers more than you ask for. You want relief, He offers life. Come to Him in faith. Open your heart to Him. Tell Him the whole truth about yourself. Receive all He has for you. Then go in peace and live in the freedom he gives.