

When you talk to God or pray to God what sort of attitude or mindset do you have? I think when a lot of people pray they do so with a measure of humble reverence. They may be bold to ask for things but may also include, "thy will be done." I suppose that's a pretty mature way to pray. It asks for God's help but isn't over demanding; and is overall accepting.

People who may not pray often may find themselves turning to prayer when they are in desperate need of help. They've let a situation go beyond what they can handle and don't know where else to turn. I'm always reminded of the scene in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* where Jimmy Stewart had just realized his business is ruined. He goes to a bar and makes these desperate anguished prayers for help.

Sometimes people pray in anger. Something unfair has happened and they rail out against God with fury. They may cry things like, "Why did this happen?" Or, "Why did you let this happen? Why didn't you help?"

Yelling or screaming at God in anger may not be the kind of thing we would recommend doing with all comfort. After all, God is all powerful and the ultimate judge. You might be heading for disaster if you're not careful. And yet, the Bible is full of stories about people who've gotten angry with God. Our gospel reading for today is a very anger-filled text, although the way it is translated you may miss it.

It starts off with a leper coming to Jesus and saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean." We may imagine a poor helpless leper tentatively approaching Jesus with a trembling heart. Indeed that is the way the translation leads us to understand it. The Greek text of Mark makes this picture possible, but not exclusive. It just as easily be a challenge to Jesus' honor. The man comes up and says with arrogant tone, "You could cleanse me... *if you choose.*" The leper knew from the beginning that Jesus could heal him.

Now such an approach to Jesus does seem appropriate, considering he is the benevolent Son of God. Wouldn't a humble request be more likely to succeed? Who knows, but if we consider this request to be a challenge to Jesus honor, Jesus' response may make more sense. Our Bibles read, "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him..."

Indeed most ancient copies of the gospel of Mark have these words. But it is most likely that is not what Mark wrote. Other ancient manuscripts have a word variation. If you look at your Bibles at home they may have a footnote to this verse that says, "Other ancient authorities read 'anger'". And so the verse is then, "Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him."

There's a number of reasons why this makes more sense than saying Jesus was moved with pity. One of those reasons comes just two verses later. In verse 43 our Bibles read, "And sternly warning him he sent him away at once." That's a wimpy translation. It's more literally, "And snorting like a horse Jesus sent him away saying, 'See that you say nothing to anyone..'" The whole scene is filled with anger.

We may not know exactly what to do with this angry portrayal of Jesus. It certainly doesn't fit with the many Sunday school pictures we may have seen in times past where Jesus is always pictured as sweet and kind and gentle. It may seem easier to just say Jesus was moved with pity and minimize the part about the stern warning to say nothing to anyone.

That may seem easier, but I don't think it does justice to this text. I think we need to let it speak in all its challenging ways. And let's look at them too.

This healing cost Jesus severely. Did the leper obey? Did he just go to the priest and then keep it quiet? Nope. He went out and told everybody. Who could blame him really? If you had a contagious deadly disease and you weren't allowed to be in contact with anyone; you were going to die an outcast and alone; and then suddenly you were cured what would you do? You'd be happy! You'd be overjoyed. Life was going to end in painful lonely misery. Now there is new life and new hope! You'd grasp every bit of it you could and you'd sing the praises of the person who healed you.

But what did it cost Jesus? In verse 45 we read, "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter." Was this what Jesus was called to do with his earthly ministry? Was Jesus to be a healer, miracle worker, and exorcist? No. Jesus begins his public ministry by continuing the work done by John the Baptist. Jesus begins his work by saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." That is the thrust of Jesus' public

ministry. Being a miracle worker was secondary. Could he do miracles? Yes, he could. But he didn't want to be known as a miracle worker. As the story of his ministry unfolds we learn that Jesus ultimately wanted to be known as the crucified one. This leper cost Jesus a lot of his focus. People started coming to him for the wrong reasons. He couldn't get rest.

The verses immediately following our gospel reading say, "When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them..."

If this leper did indeed come to him with a request that was a challenge to Jesus' honor - "You can make me clean - *if you want to,*" and Jesus knows how it will negatively affect his ministry I think he has every right to be angry. In fact I'm glad he was. Who was in charge here? Jesus, the Son of God - or an unknown leper?

Yet notice that despite knowing the cost, Jesus does not refuse the man. The leper says, "If you choose you can make me clean." And even in anger Jesus says, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

I think we learn a lot about God's grace and mercy here. Despite what was probably an arrogant challenge to Jesus' honor, Jesus does not reject the man. And despite the cost it will bring to Jesus' ministry, he still heals him.

I think it is safe to get mad at God. It is safe to demand things, even if they aren't appropriate. You probably won't get them, but you can still make the request known. God would rather have you angry, than not engaged. It is when you turn your back or refuse to pray that you start to become lost. Apathy is probably the biggest detriment to faith. If the leper had said, "Oh, I don't care whether I'm healed or not," he never would have been healed. His life would not have been restored. He would have died painfully and alone. Instead, he took a risk. Perhaps his attitude was not right, but he engaged Jesus and came away the better for it.

While we may not have Jesus face to face when we want to yell at him, he is still present in our lives. The Bible tells us that in and through each other we are the body of Christ. A part of that is also approaching God in prayer.

May you use your faith and engage it - with meekness, with submission, with confidence, with boldness, and even with anger when you feel the need. God hears and knows your needs, and will save you through them. Amen