

Thoughts about NLT:

Healing is not just physical, but can be deeper — spiritual, mental and emotional. God is interested in the whole person. Many people have been cured physically of leprosy through NLT's work. They often need counseling and practical help to overcome years of rejection, stigma and isolation, since people with leprosy are usually excluded from their families and communities. (Even husbands and wives sometimes reject their partner if they find out their partner has leprosy.) Many are unable to find suitable work, and exclusion from the village community is devastating. So there is much fear surrounding the disease in countries such as Nepal and India today, even though leprosy can be treated through multi-drug therapy. Some people who have been cured of leprosy medically, experience much deeper healing too.

Many people in Nepal today, just like in other countries, have heard something about Jesus, but do not yet understand who he is, or know him personally. The work carried out through NLT was initiated by Christian service, motivated by wanting to change the plight of people affected by leprosy in the name of Christ, an expression of God's care and compassion for needy people and their families in Nepal.

The church in Nepal has grown significantly since the 1950s, especially during times of persecution, from almost zero believers in Nepal about 70 years ago. Christians have to be careful in Nepal, since there are many who strongly oppose anyone turning to Christ and becoming a Christian. Some Christians speak out about their faith; others seek to be witnesses for Christ through their lives, but keep silent. Which approach do you think is most effective or appropriate? Do the same issues apply in the country where you live?

Mark's Gospel – Study Notes for Small Groups

Week 3 – Being told to keep a secret

There is a strange paradox in Mark's gospel – it's all about the announcement of **good news** (as we saw in our first study), but at the same time there seems to be the need for **secrecy**! In the first chapter, Jesus doesn't allow the demons to speak about him (1:34); and the man healed of leprosy is told not to say anything to anyone (1:44). In this study we explore this recurring aspect – the so-called 'messianic secret'.

A deeper message? ... Why miracles?

It seems Jesus does not want to be known as a 'miracle-worker' lest people follow him for the wrong reason. However, Jesus *does* do miracles. In fact, he can't seem to stop himself doing them (as we saw in the last study)! Miracles are a key feature of Mark's gospel, which describes Jesus performing miracles as compassionate acts. Is Mark treading a delicate line with subtlety? Jesus did not come *primarily* as a miracle-worker; rather, he has a deeper message and transformation to offer.

Mark 2:1-11 ... Jesus heals a paralysed man:

The point about this miracle is not so much the miracle itself, but about Jesus forgiving sins. Consider the following:

(a) Why do we think Jesus first pointed to the need for sins to be forgiven? (verse 5). Is our **deepest need** for physical healing or actually for something deeper? – needing guilt forgiven, emotions healed, inner burdens lifted? What do people most deeply need healing for and from?

(b) What makes Jesus still perform the miracle of healing here? Is he doing it just to demonstrate the deeper thing? or because of the friends' faith? or out of compassion? or all these things?

(c) Is Jesus being '**secretive**' in this miracle? It seems to be the opposite. Does Jesus appear to be a 'showman' or someone displaying integrity? Such a person can be known and trusted, not just admired and 'used' to gain healing.

Why parables?

Mark 4:9-12 ... Jesus explains why he speaks in parables:

Quoting Isaiah 6:9-10, Jesus paradoxically suggests that, although his parables are explained to the disciples, they are designed to be baffling for everyone else! What does this mean? Consider the following:

(a) Is it rather that some people can't understand God's truth because they're not ready for it? Or do they refuse the truth?

(b) Is it more effective for Jesus to be 'preachy', or to tell stories and for people to draw their own conclusions?

Parables are comparisons — stories placed alongside a truth: "the kingdom of God is like..." In this case, it is like seed falling on four different kinds of soil. If over-explained they could lose their impact. So, if Jesus is too clear about who he is, might this put people off listening to him? Does he deliberately leave himself open to misinterpretation?

Why misunderstandings?

In Mark's gospel, the disciples seem to be conspicuously stupid. They just don't get it! Yet this might be a more general thing... neither do we today (after 2000 years of Christian history). Mark is writing to an early Christian community experiencing persecution. Fear, doubt and disorientation seem to be setting in.

Mark 13:11 ... persecution is coming:

(a) How would we read Mark's gospel differently if we lived in a war zone today? What sort of things would give us hope if we were faced with such daily fear?

(b) If Mark's gospel is written in a context of danger for Christians, might it help to explain why 'secrets' need to be kept? "Careless talk costs lives!" was a war-time poster.

A general question:

Do we find it easy to keep secrets? Who are the people we trust most? "If someone gossips to us, then they will probably also gossip about us"!

A few quotes to think about:

"The secret of your future is hidden in your daily routine"

(Mike Murdock, American televangelist, 1946-)

"The secret of business is to know something that nobody else knows"

(Aristotle Onassis, Greek shipping magnate, 1906-75)

"The secret of success is learning how to use pain and pleasure... If you do that, you're in control of your life. If you don't, life controls you"

(Tony Robbins, American life coach, 1960-)

"Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal. My strength lies solely in my tenacity"

(Louis Pasteur, French chemist & microbiologist, 1822-95)

"Still around the corner there may wait a new road or a secret gate!"

(J R R Tolkien, English professor & author, 1892-1973)

"If you have a secret, people will sit a little bit closer"

(Rob Corddry, American actor & comedian, 1971-)

"One of the secrets of life is that all that is worth the doing is what we do for others"

(Lewis Carroll, English writer, 1832-98)

"If God should desire to raise us to the position of one who shares his secrets, we ought to accept this gladly"

(St. Teresa of Avila, Spanish mystic, 1515-82).

Prayer:

Living God, your Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread.

Open the eyes of our faith,
that we may see him in all his redeeming work.
He is alive and reigns, now and forever. Amen.