

Luke 5:12-16 — The Leper's Plea

(Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45)

12 While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell facedown and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

13 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

14 "Do not tell anyone," Jesus instructed him. "But go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering Moses prescribed for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

15 But the news about Jesus spread all the more, and great crowds came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. 16 Yet he frequently withdrew to the wilderness to pray.

Footnotes

12 Leprosy was a term used for various skin diseases. See Leviticus 13.

14 See Leviticus 14:1-32.

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Where does one begin to unpack this story? Leprosy is both a complicated physical/social issue and a profound parable of our sin problem.

Physically, "leprosy" in ancient times covered a broader range of ailments than our modern Hansen's disease. The Pulpit Commentary notes: "The face and different members of the body were attacked and gradually destroyed, till the sufferer became a hideous spectacle, and literally fell to pieces. ... Those afflicted with what was usually called leprosy were rigidly separated from their fellows, not only to dwell apart, but positively forbidden to approach the dwellings of men."

No group in ancient society was more pitiful. Lepers died "inch by inch." (Shepherd's) Theirs was indeed a living death. In biblical times, a leper "was

looked upon as smitten with a divine plague. ... He had to live apart from his fellows, to wear on his brow the outward sign of separation, to cry out the words of warning, 'Unclean, unclean' (Leviticus 13:45)." (Ellicott) Jewish tradition required that a leper who entered Jerusalem was to be beaten. (Gill) In the Middle Ages, a person afflicted with leprosy was "clothed in a shroud, and the masses of the dead sung over him." (Cambridge Bible) He was "a dreadful parable of death." (Vincent)

MacArthur wrote that "being a leper was the worst imaginable condition, horribly disfiguring, horribly ugly, ... religiously isolated, socially isolated, economically isolated, no family, no job, no friends, no worship, no hope."¹

One modern-day missionary to India reported: "One old lady with leprosy attended a church service I spoke at and came up to me afterward. With the aid of a translator, she asked me to pray for her – not that she would be healed, but that she would die. That's not a prayer request you get every day. But that is how horrible leprosy is."²

Curiously, the biblical law mandated that when leprosy had completely overrun a person's body, he was declared ceremonially clean (Leviticus 13:13) and was allowed to return to his family and join worshippers at the synagogue. (Ellicott) For those who are so inclined, Gill offers an extended and extremely detailed description of the effects of leprosy, its analogy with sin, and Christ's cleansing from each.³

The powerful analogy between biblical leprosy and sin is one we would do well to both ponder and proclaim. Both evoke loathing, especially among those who are (or consider themselves) healthy. Both spread until the entire person is destroyed. And the victim knows no human power could for a moment "arrest the silent and steady march of this foe to the seat of life." (Barnes) Both the leper and the convicted sinner are "virtually dead men mourning over their lost and hopeless condition." (Edgar)

v.12

One can imagine, then, the desperation that drove this grievously afflicted soul to break taboo and slip into the crowd without announcing his uncleanness. When

he falls facedown before Jesus, you can almost hear the crowd gasp as they recoil in horror.

While so many came to Jesus for healing (*iasasthai*, S2390), this man's circumstances were far more pathetic and his need even greater. He begs to be made clean (*katharisai*, S2511). Most of those who sought healing still had the benefit of family, society, and synagogue. Not only is this man diseased, but he also is spiritually and ceremonially unclean – unworthy to be in the presence of both man and God.

This leper's heart pounds with even greater urgency, however, because he knows he has very little time before the crowd's shock turns to outrage and they drive him away. On his face before the Lord, with no doubt about Jesus' ability to heal him, he timidly pleads for the Lord's willingness to care about someone as unworthy as he. Vincent offers an insightful observation: "As a rule, men do not naturally associate love and power; they believe in the existence of power far more readily than in that of love."

"If you are willing" is where all sinners under the Holy Spirit's conviction find themselves. Sin, after all, is "the leprosy of the soul." (Clarkson) Even a disciple in distress may harbor uncertainty about Jesus' willingness to deliver. What if the Lord isn't willing? What if his will is that we remain in our distress?

"If you are willing" is fitting language, Davies suggests, "not because we doubt His goodness, but because we believe in His wisdom. If we learn that it is God's will that we should suffer and have disappointment, we hope amidst our pain, and know that our disappointment is after all the appointment of the wiser still, and that, whatever may be in the meantime withheld, the answer will be given at last, 'Be thou clean.'"

Uncertainty – even fear – should not prevent us from seeking our own cleansing. In Clarkson's words: "Be not troubled, far less hindered, because hope is streaked with fear; there may be an 'if' in the heart, as there was in that of this leper. ... Such fear is only the shadow of a prevailing hope."

v.13

If the leper's presence shocked the crowd, shock turned to horror when Jesus didn't pull back from the man but, unbelievably, stretched out his hand and touched the diseased man. Not only was touching a leper one of the worst social taboos, but the Law of Moses itself declared that the act made a person ceremonially impure. (Leviticus 13:3)

Why would Jesus do such an offensive and dangerous thing? Mark's Gospel offers a helpful insight: Jesus was "moved with compassion." (1:41) He felt the depths of this poor soul's suffering and desperation.

The Pulpit Commentary observes:

The Redeemer, at the sight of the man's awful wretchedness – wasting away, shunned by all men, dragging on a hopeless, aimless, weary life – in his Divine pity, with a sudden impulse tosses aside all considerations of ceremonial uncleanness or contagion, and lays his hand on the miserable sufferer from whom all shrank, with his word of power exclaimed, "I will: be thou clean." ... In these sudden cases, in which the common brotherhood of man was involved, the nobler spirits of Israel ever rose above all consideration of law and custom, and, putting aside all legal, orthodox restriction, obeyed at once the sovereign dictates of the heart. So Elijah and Elisha, those true saints of God, shrank not from touching the dead.

MacArthur offers a penetrating insight that, in a profound sense, Jesus didn't actually touch a leper! "Jesus stepped right past that law because when he touched him he wasn't a leper anymore."¹

Jesus' didn't need to say "I am willing" to the man. He could have just spoken the powerful words "Be clean." The leper, however, needed to be delivered of his fear, as much as of his disease. So, before healing the body, the Lord healed the heart with reassurance. (Expositor's) The leper not only was freed from his physical affliction, he also was restored to family, society, and synagogue. (Filament)

Many in our society recoil from touch because "bad touch" is exploited to abuse vulnerable people. Jesus' kindness in touching the leper, however, should point us toward the power of simple human "good" touch to communicate love and concern for someone who is suffering – and practically everyone is suffering, in

one way or another. The afflicted may be a neighbor who is very much like you or someone you would cross the street to avoid.

Clarkson exhorts us: “We, too, must be ready, like our Lord, to do that which is distasteful, to run some risks, to disregard conventional proprieties, if we would remove from the land the leprosies which still afflict it.”

As important as Jesus’ words “Be clean” were, Ryle suggests that “I will” deserves its own special attention:

Those two little words ... are a deep mine, rich in comfort and encouragement to all laboring and heavy laden souls. They show us the mind of Christ towards sinners. They exhibit His infinite willingness to do good to the sons of men, and His readiness to show compassion. Let us always remember, that if men are not saved, it is not because Jesus is not willing to save them. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.⁴

vv.14-15

“Show yourself to the priest” — Leviticus 14:1-32 lists detailed instructions for a person cleansed of leprosy to be examined by a priest and declared clean, following which a sacrifice was to be offered. Jesus was doing more than ordering the cleansed man to follow the Law. He also was putting before the priests incontrovertible evidence of a messianic healing – an in-your-face testimony to the religious establishment.

“Do not tell anyone” — During his early ministry, Jesus often gives this charge to those he healed – and it seems it almost always was disregarded. How could this leper keep quiet about his amazing, complete deliverance and restoration? Barnes suggests the command “is to be understood as extending only to the time until he had made the proper representation to the priest.”

Perhaps it is more likely, however, that “the Master wished to stem rather than to fan the tide of popularity which such mighty works would be sure to excite among the people. What he determined to check was a false and mistaken desire among the people to make him king.” (Pulpit) The Expositor’s Commentary suggests that

“Jesus wanted first to do the works of the Messiah and to fulfill his basic mission of sacrificial suffering before being publicly proclaimed as Messiah.”

“The news spread all the more” — A soul set free — filled with gratitude and excitement — must find it impossible to hold his tongue. The predictable result was that the Lord’s work of teaching was hindered by the crowds who flooded to him in search of healing. Jesus, however, had much more important work before him.

v.16

“He withdrew to the wilderness” — Not only did the Son of Man need time away from the demands of the multitudes, he also needed to be alone in the Father’s presence.

Edgar notes: “There is a certain measure of exhaustion in such work as was performed by Jesus. He bowed to the necessity of private communion with God. Even Jesus could not be always in public; solitude was as needful for his soul's health as society for his opportunity of usefulness. ... It is in the secret place with God that we renew our spiritual strength and are fit for further service.”

In this, our Lord set an example for all of us. None of us have ever been in such demand for either teaching or healing, but even Jesus needed to ensure that his public ministry did not impinge on his private time with his Father. Ryle observes that, “Holy and undefiled as He was He would not allow the demands of public business to prevent regular private communion with God.”⁴

Ryle continues:

There are few professing Christians, it may be feared, who strive to imitate Christ in this matter of private devotion. There is abundance of hearing, and reading, and talking, and profession, and visiting, and almsgiving, and subscribing to societies, and teaching at schools. But is there, together with all this, a due proportion of private prayer?

And he concludes:

Why is it that there is so much apparent religious working, and yet so little result in positive conversions to God – so many sermons, and so few souls saved – so much machinery, and so little effect produced – so much running here and there, and yet so few brought to Christ? Why is all this? The reply is short and simple. There is not enough private prayer.

1 <https://www.logos.com/product/42581/john-macarthur-sermon-archive>

2 https://redeeminggod.com/sermons/luke/luke_5_12-16/

3 <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/luke/5.htm>

4 <https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=32889>