

THE CLEANSING OF THE LEPER

Mark 1:40-45

September 17, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

How would you react if you were suddenly approached by a person with a known incurable disease that is potentially life threatening and highly contagious? My heart was challenged with this question in the winter of 1994. I was driving home from coaching a boy's basketball game when I witnessed an accident. A car ran a red light and T-boned the car in front of me. Of course, my first thought was that 2-seconds later this would have been me. Once I was able to get my thoughts off of myself, I got out to make sure everyone was all right. Fortunately, it was not a very high impact accident so my thoughts were that everyone would be OK. I was stopping more as a witness and to contact the police.

As I was helping the driver out of the car that had been hit, which had taken the brunt of the impact on the rear driver's side door panel, I reached in to grab her arm to stabilize her. Getting her to her feet, I realized that she had a gash on the back of her arm – right where I had placed my hand. For you young people, this might not seem like that big a deal. But in 1994, we lived in the height of the concerns about HIV, a deadly disease that can be transmitted through bodily fluids. Although my hand was not covered with the woman's blood, I must admit that I became rather anxious, enough so that when the paramedics arrived on the scene, I immediately let them know. They said that they would test the woman, which was procedure at that time, and that I would be informed if there were any need for concern. All turned out OK – the woman was fine, both from the accident and free of HIV.

This morning we take a look at a similar incident in the life of our Lord. There were no cars involved. There was no accident nor were any traffic citations given. It was actually just another day in the ministry of Christ. As He was working His way across Galilee, a man approached Him. Jesus would have immediately recognized that there was something quite different about this man. He had a highly contagious, life threatening disease called leprosy. While leprosy is very treatable today, that was not the case in the 1st century. It was the HIV of Jesus' time. How would Jesus react? Would fear enter His heart much like it did mine when I noticed the blood on my hand from the injured woman? Would He analyze the situation and make a decision based on medical knowledge? Or would He simply respond to the request of the man?

I. The Confidence of the Man (1:40)

There are only two characters in this narrative, Jesus and this man who approaches Him. We look first at the man, particularly at the confidence he had in approaching Jesus.

1. His need

This man's confidence began in recognizing his need. He was a leper. Leprosy was the worst type of disease imaginable in his day. In 2 Kings 5 we read of the cure of Naaman's leprosy. Luke tells us that "there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; *and none of them was cleansed*, but only Naaman the Syrian" (4:27). So leprosy during this time was incurable apart from the intervention of God, even in its lesser forms such as Elisha's servant Gehazi and his descendants were stricken with (2 Kings 5:27). Leprosy was so severe the rabbis said that it was easier to raise the dead than heal a leper.

The difficulty in cleansing or healing a leper was attributed to the nature of the disease. It was an absolutely horrid, debilitating disease in every respect, and highly contagious. Many incorrectly think that leprosy is a skin disease because of the effects of the disease that are clearly seen. But leprosy strikes the nervous system, numbing the nerve endings so that a person loses all sense of feeling and touch. You could step on a nail, cut yourself shaving, or touch a scalding hot dish and not feel it. A wound could be opened up on your skin and you would not notice it. So the leper was prone to all sorts of other infectious diseases. Their skin could literally rot and they would not know it. Many lost their limbs and other extremities. And the stench associated with the disease was unbearable.

Derek Thomas remarked that the Old Testament had a rather primitive approach in treating this disease, what he called “barrier medicine.”¹ Leviticus 13 had all kinds of rules and regulations concerning leprosy. Because of the high rate of contagion, a leper’s clothes were considered infectious and the walls of their house were considered contaminated. Lepers were quarantined and their homes shut up, and the worst cases were removed from their homes, shut off from society and placed in colonies with other lepers somewhere outside the camp. If they made their way into town, they were to tear their clothes and their head was to be uncovered so that all could plainly see the disease. And they were to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean” as they passed by others.

These regulations, however, were not for a cure, or even for the individual himself, but for the protection of others. As for the leper himself Geoff Thomas remarked, “Moses and the law could not help this man. It could tell him that leprosy was bad. It could tell him where he had to live, and how he had to dress, and what he had to shout, but it couldn’t cure him. He could make every sacrifice in the book of Leviticus, but he would still be a leper... There was nothing in the Old Testament that could heal him, and not even a top doctor in Jerusalem could prescribe anything to make him better... Leprosy was everywhere but a cure was nowhere.”² Leprosy immediately had complete social ostracism attached to it and there was nothing a leper could do. And the man who approached Jesus here was a terrible case. Luke says that he was “covered with leprosy” (5:12). It had covered his face, his head, his arms and hands. His entire body was covered with ulcers and he was in agony like Job was when Satan was allowed by God to “touch his bone and his flesh” (Job 2:5-8). This man was absolutely helpless and desperate. But he was not absolutely hopeless.

2. His actions

The actions of this man by my assessment are quite remarkable. In one verse we see a man who thoroughly and completely throws himself at Jesus as his only hope. His actions show his faith that Jesus alone could heal him.

First, notice that Mark is careful to tell us, “**And a leper came to Jesus.**” The leper did not wait for Jesus to make his way out to his colony for there was no assurance that He would even do so. He had somehow heard about this Man who had healed all who were brought to Him in Capernaum and how He now was continuing His journey across Galilee performing the same type of miracles. He now approaches Jesus, who he certainly recognizes as his only hope of ever being cleansed of this horrible incurable disease. He leaves the colony, agonizingly travels into the center of town, screaming “Unclean! Unclean!” as he works his way through the crowds that were certainly present around Jesus. He unwaveringly and unashamedly comes to Jesus, open

¹ [http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek's SERMONS/Mark/02mark.htm](http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek's%20SERMONS/Mark/02mark.htm)

² <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/mark9.htm>

sores and stench and all. He breaks the laws and customs of the day by compromising the area of ritual cleanliness. He invades Jesus' territory, unconcerned about what the law stated and what others thought. For where the law could not save him, when other people were unable to help him, Jesus could.

Notice secondly the earnestness in which he came. **“And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on His knees before Him.”** **“Beseeching Him”** means he came begging. He had an urgent plea, a desperate plea. His begging shows both his understanding of his helplessness as well as his confidence that Jesus alone could heal him. We go to the doctor because we are sick and we expect to be made well. This man came to the Doctor, with every confidence that the Great Physician could remedy him.

This is shown further by the man's posture. He drops to his knees at Jesus' feet. He assumes the position of a beggar. Luke tells us that he literally buried his face in the ground (5:12), which demonstrates the humility of this man. He did not look into the eyes of Jesus. He shows by these actions that he is submitting to the authority of Jesus. A leper would not kneel before another leper, but it was most appropriate for this man to fall on his knees before the King of Kings and the Lord of lords. He certainly did not know all there was to know about Jesus – but what he knew, he trusted.

Then, and only then, the leper speaks. His request shows that he is not simply some crazed maniac, desperate though he was. His words show that he understood a bit more about Jesus than the crowds in Capernaum. They brought all of their sick and demon-possessed to Jesus, not because of who He was, but because of what He could do for them. They saw that He was healing all of them, no questions asked. But rather than notice the heart of the Healer, they simply took Him for granted, seeking His physical healing while ignoring His message.

This man shows us something different. **“If You are willing,”** he says, **“You can make me clean.”** In this statement we see the difference in attitude between the crowds at Capernaum and this leper. The crowds at Capernaum came saying, “He is willing.” The leper says, **“If you are willing.”** He did not take for granted the sovereignty of Jesus. He understood that Jesus alone held the key to whether he would be cleansed, made whole, and able to return to society. This was not a question of Jesus' ability, “If you can,” but a total submission to His sovereignty. It was not to question His power, “You might be able to help me,” but a statement of His power, **“You can make me clean.”** So the question was not whether Jesus was *able* to make him clean, but whether Jesus was *willing* to make him clean, not *could* Jesus do what he asked, but *if* Jesus would do what he asked.

II. The Response of Jesus (1:41-45)

Given the apparent audacity of this man, one might expect that Jesus would have rebuked him. As James Edwards put it, “In the face of such an intrusion, one would expect an observant Jew to recoil in protection and defense.”³ But how did Jesus respond to this man who had invaded His territory according to the boundaries of a leper required by Levitical law?

1. His compassion (v. 41a)

“Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand, and touched him.” Mark is the only one of the writers that remarks, **“moved with compassion.”** The word in the Greek denotes a deep inward agitation, a welling up inside. Jesus is moved to the very depths of His

³ James R. Edwards, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 69.

being and there is a burning desire in His heart to relieve this pained feeling, this deep, inward disturbance that He had for this man. Some very early manuscripts read that Jesus was “angry.” This is a possible rendering for Jesus’ compassion here. He was not “angry” with the man himself, but with his condition, his misery. Jesus had tremendous pity for this pitiful man.

But Jesus did not keep this welling emotion inside. He demonstrates His compassion. He **“stretched out His hand, and touched him.”** We mustn’t miss the importance of this action. Jesus reaches out and touches the unclean leper. Imagine what this must have felt like to this man. How long it had been since he had felt the touch of a human hand. If he was married, he had not even felt the embrace his wife. If he had children, he had not felt their hugs in perhaps years. There had been not even so much as a handshake from anyone else the entire time of his disease. Imagine how his heart must have melted within him when Jesus reaches out and touches him. The leper had forgotten what it was like to be touched until Jesus touched him.

But from Jesus perspective, He wanted the leper to know of His willingness to heal him. Jesus did not just *say* that He was willing to cleanse Him. He showed it. He touched the leper. Geoff Thomas states, “The touch of Jesus was an outward and visible sign of the inward invisible passion in the heart of the Lord for this man.”⁴ A rabbi never would have done such a thing because of the risk of ceremonial defilement. But Jesus does not hesitate. He does not concern Himself with defilement. He does not stop and examine the risk to His own health. He touched the untouchable! And rather than being defiled by the leper, His touch immediately cleanses the leper. But, you see, that is what the touch of Jesus does. It removes all of the social, physical, and spiritual separation of the Law. One writer states, “The touch of Jesus speaks more loudly than Jesus’ words; and the words of Jesus touch the leper more deeply than any act of human love.”⁵ This touch of the leper and the compassion that it outwardly and visibly showed was demonstrated in all of its forcefulness some three years later on the Cross, when Jesus visibly demonstrated His compassion for all spiritual lepers, for all of those who are helpless and desperate because of sin, for all those who come to Christ as this man did. This man did not try to clean himself up first. That was impossible. He did not try to make himself acceptable to God. That was impossible. He simply came to Jesus believing – and Jesus touched the untouchable.

2. His power (v. 41b-42)

“Jesus stretched out His hand, and touched Him, and said to him, ‘I am willing; be cleansed.’ Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.” Instant healing. Just as with Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, the cleansing was total and complete. There were absolutely no residual effects of this man’s leprosy, not even so much as a pimple. **“I am willing”** shows that this was an act of Jesus’ own volition predicated by His deep compassion. It is a present indicative, expressing His standing will for the man. **“Be cleansed”** is an aorist imperative, commanding the man’s cleansing as a definite, full, complete act. And perhaps most importantly, **“be cleansed”** is in the passive voice, indicating that the man was a passive recipient of the cleansing. In other words, the cleansing that came to the leper was the result of Jesus’ word and power. Jesus gave and the man received. This man offered nothing in this cleansing but the disease to be cleansed. With the word of Jesus, **“be cleansed,”** and with the

⁴ <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/mark9.htm>

⁵ Ibid, p. 70

touch by the outstretched hand of Jesus, the leper is made whole, the untouchable touchable, the unclean clean. The leprosy vanished, leaving him free of the disease and its ravages.⁶

3. His warning (vv. 43-45)

Jesus' cleansing came with a stern warning, a demand that was two-fold. First, Jesus told the cleansed leper not to tell anyone (v. 44). We have seen this command of silence given to the demons on two previous occasions. There we noted that Jesus' purpose was so that He would not be identified as being in league with Satan and his minions, even though their testimony of Jesus was correct and they knew who He was (vv. 24, 34). But that is not the case with this man. His command of silence here is for another purpose that is revealed by the second part of this demand, **“Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”** In other words, Jesus' command of silence was temporary. Once the man fulfilled this Levitical requirement then he was free to go tell everyone.

Why was Jesus insistent on the man fulfilling this requirement? Because according to the Law of Moses, until the proper legal offering had been made, the man was still ceremonially unclean. Jesus knew he was clean. The man knew he was clean. But if others saw the leper and heard of his story before he had been officially announced clean by the priest, they might deny, and probably would deny, either that he had been a leper at all or that he had been truly cleansed.

But there was something deeper here. While the man going through the proper procedure would serve as a testimony to others, more importantly Jesus says it would be **“a testimony to them,”** **“them”** being the priests. This miracle would serve as an undeniable messianic sign to them. As Geoff Thomas rightly points out, “It was too soon in Jesus' ministry for his challenge of the religious leadership of his day to be made known.”⁷ It was too soon for this battle, so Jesus straightforwardly tells the man to go forth, and tell no one until you have done what is right in the eyes of the priest. Then Jesus **“sent him away,”** literally, “forced him out.” It is the same word that He used in expelling the merchandisers from the temple. This man should have known from Jesus' sternness that He meant business. To disobey His command would have dire consequences.

Then we have the saddest word in this entire text, **“but”** (v. 45). The man, cleansed and healed, disobeys the command of Jesus. The earnestness and humility by which he had approached Jesus suddenly turned to disregard. He broadcasts the news of his cleansing all over, so much so that the ministry of Christ was hindered. I like what James Edwards comments on this occasion, “An adverse irony results. Jesus has relieved the leper of his burden, but in broadcasting the news the leper imposes a burden on Jesus... Mark began this story with Jesus on the inside and the leper on the outside. At the end of the story, Jesus is ‘outside in lonely places.’ Jesus and the leper have traded places.”⁸

The man with leprosy is the perfect illustration of how our sin blinds us to the truth about our circumstances. This man truly believed that Jesus could heal him and he boldly approached Jesus asking for Jesus' help. Whether the man had saving faith is not made clear but his actions show that his salvation was in question. Because Jesus was compassionate on those who suffer, he healed the man. But leprosy was not the man's greatest problem. His greatest problem was that he was a sinner and that he stood guilty before God. When Jesus heals him and removed

⁶ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Gospel of Mark: An Expository Commentary*, p. 59.

⁷ <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/mark9.htm>

⁸ *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 72.

from his body the ravages of this disease, the man should have realized that Jesus also had the authority to forgive him of his sins. But instead of repenting and believing the content of Jesus' preaching, this man's joy got the better of him and he disobeyed Jesus and told everyone that Jesus had healed him, making it that much more difficult for Jesus to preach the gospel. This poor man was thankful to be healed, but apparently missed the whole point. He is a sinner in need of the salvation Jesus brings.

Conclusion

- 1. The leper's physical condition serves as a picture of the spiritual condition of all men.**
- 2. The leper's initial actions serve as an example of how the sinner should come to Christ.**
- 3. The leper's final actions serve as a warning. If the man was saved, then it serves as a warning that the Lord's work is to be done in the Lord's way in the Lord's time. If he was not saved, then it serves as a warning against spurious, purely emotional faith.**