

Luke 5:12-26

Jesus Meets Desperation

We are going to Luke 5 today.

This time of the year in Rochester, we have days that are characterized by darkness. It's dark late into the morning, most of us wake up while it's dark. It's dark when we get home from work. It can be somewhat depressing. So we offset the whole thing with Christmas lights.

Which is a good way to celebrate the coming of Jesus. Scripture describes the coming of Jesus as light coming into a dark world:

**John 1:9 "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world"**

So the world is dark, but Jesus is the light that comes into the darkness. He comes and gets close to bring light.

And of course that darkness isn't the darkness of short winter days, but of sin, sorrow, loss, and death that all make the world a dark place.

When we see the darkness of the world around us, we could deny it, saying, "It's not really dark," the world isn't that bad. But if you get close to people who are suffering that's tough to really believe. Another approach is to run from the darkness and try to create bubbles of life that aren't all that dark for us. Or we might be overcome by the darkness and become contributors to the darkness, getting so overwhelmed by it that we spread sorrow ourselves.

But the way of Jesus is to bring light to the darkness. It's not to deny the darkness exists. It's not to run in fear, and it is not to be overcome by the darkness. But the way of Jesus to get close to the dark realities of life in order to bring light and peace.

So in today's passage we are going to see two people whose lives were marked by incredible suffering, even more than most. And we see Jesus bring light to them, which is a reminder of what He does for us and what we're called to do in the world around us.

**Luke 5:12 While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."**

Leprosy is a term that is used more specifically in our day than it was in the Bible. In our day it is just referring to Hansen's Disease<sup>1</sup>, one specific disorder. In the Bible Leprosy was any dreaded skin disease. Some forms of what they called leprosy could go away. But when you had one of those conditions, you didn't know if you had the kind that would go away or the kind that only progressed with no cure.

If the disease progressed, it was horrible. You would get large lesions and nodules on your skin, your nerves would begin to become damaged, and you would lose sensation in your extremities, so people would lose the use of their hands and feet and more infections could occur because you couldn't feel if you were injuring yourself or if insects were burrowing into you.

So everyone who had any kind of leprosy was treated like they had the incurable kind just in case. Which meant total isolation. It could be contagious and fatal, so you had to be kept away from everybody.

So this was a disease that instantly severed all of your relationships. Leviticus 13 has all the rules that were in place for lepers. You could no longer live where everybody else lived until a priest certified you were cured, and if you walked anywhere, you were supposed to announce that you were unclean.

You weren't allowed to go to the temple to worship with everyone anymore because of the threat of contagion and because you were considered to be ceremonially unclean. You were unfit to enter the presence of God. You weren't allowed to have contact with anyone, because if someone touched you, they were considered unclean as well. So we almost can't imagine how bad it was to be a leper.

In this past year, I've had the opportunity to spend lots of time with people with some serious medical conditions. And every single one of the people struggling with serious

---

<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Bock, Luke 1:1- 9:50, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1994). 472.

sickness is getting encouragement and sustenance by drawing near to their families and getting support from their church.

But imagine if with the diagnosis came the command that you have to stay away from your spouse, your kids, your brothers and sisters, and your church. The only community you could experience was with a bunch of strangers with the same condition you have in a leper colony.

So leprosy that was progressing meant a death sentence, it meant isolation, and necessarily was a complete change in identity. They changed from husband to leper, from farmer to leper, from father to leper. Their whole life became about leprosy.

Plus there was a stigma. In their day, people had a false idea that all sickness was somehow a punishment from God. They must have sinned in extraordinary ways. Jesus had to correct that understanding in John 9, for example.<sup>2</sup> Many people thought lepers were being cursed or punished by God for something.

And this particular leper's disease had progressed. He is covered with leprosy, or full of leprosy (verse 12). So he has probably had the disease for awhile. It's possible that he barely knows the people that were once his closest family members. The leprosy has taken over. His world is very dark.

But he has heard about Jesus. And He knows something of who Jesus is. He has heard about the miracles, He has heard that Jesus has come speaking in power.

So he runs to Jesus.

He is so desperate that he violates all the social norms and approaches Jesus. A defiled, unholy man approaches the man he thought was a holy Rabbi, which you would never do. So I'm sure as he approached Jesus there were gasps - a guy with really bad leprosy, who is contagious, who is unclean and whose unholiness was thought to be contagious, approaches this holy man, Jesus.

And I'm sure everybody scattered. So you can picture the scene, the crowd is pressing in on Jesus, but the leper comes barging through, and everybody backs way up. So now it's just him and Jesus, with radius of 50 feet cleared out around them.

---

<sup>2</sup> See John 9:2.

Now notice what the man says, and what he doesn't say.

First, he says, "If you will, you can make me **clean**." He doesn't say, "You can heal me." He wants to be clean. Not just physically healed, but he wants the stigma lifted. He wants to be able to go around people again. He wants to worship again. He wants to be accepted in society. The uncleanness seems worse than the disease to him.

Second, he says, "**If you will**, you can make me clean." Notice that he doesn't say to Jesus, "Perhaps you have the power to heal me." He is totally convinced of Jesus's power. He has probably heard of the other miracles, or even heard he the power of Jesus' word, he knows Jesus *can* heal. The only question is whether Jesus is willing. He approaches Jesus saying, "If it be your will, you can certainly heal me."

And he is bowed before him with his face on the ground - he is praying, probably without knowing it's a prayer.

So he comes desperate, he comes lonely and isolated, he comes sick and frail, he comes knowing Jesus is his only hope, and he comes despite the social rules about approaching a holy man, he comes bowing, he comes submitting to the will of Jesus.

And Jesus, despite being clean, despite being holy, despite being a Rabbi, despite knowing this man could contaminate Him, doesn't recoil. He doesn't run from the darkness. He doesn't send him away.

And not only does he not reject the man, he does something shocking.

### **13a And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him,**

What? A pure and holy rabbi just reached out and touched a clearly unclean man covered in leprosy. This surely shocks the religious crowd, it has to shock Jesus's disciples.

And this leper, for the first time in years, is touched by another human. At one time he could cuddle with his kids and embrace his wife and hug his family, but ever since that spot showed up on his skin he's been living a life of solitary confinement. Jesus touches him.

This is the first person he has met who isn't afraid of him. The first person who cares more for him than for himself.

And, according to the law, Jesus would have been defiled here. He touched an unclean person and he would be considered to be unclean himself. So these crowds around Him must have screeched into silence at this point - this was so totally unexpected. What rabbi would touch a leper and take that kind of curse on himself? He was risking his own cleanness, He was risking his own health, to touch this man. He was being defiled.

But this is Jesus. This is what He does. This shocking moment showed them what His mission in life was. He would not only risk uncleanness to cleanse, He would take real uncleanness on Himself so we could be made whole.

**2 Corinthians 5:21 “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

Jesus would not only risk isolation, but would die alone, isolated from His Father, so that we could be cleansed.

This is the good news of Christianity. That we are unclean and defiled, but Jesus went to the cross to take our defilement upon Himself, and so we could be made clean.

So Jesus touches him, and says:

**13b saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him.**

Jesus says to Him, “You’re right. The question wasn’t whether I could heal you, the question is whether I am willing. And I am willing. Be clean!”

Jesus touches the leper and JESUS infects the LEPER with his cleanness. He is showing that he is something totally different from what they've ever seen. He reverses the laws of contamination.

In the new order of things that Jesus is bringing in, cleanness can infect when there is contact with uncleanness.

This happens right after Peter told Jesus “go away from me, I’m too sinful to be around you.” This is demonstrating to Peter and all the others the power of Jesus to clean, to disinfect, to make whole.

Jesus doesn't run from the darkness or deny the darkness, Jesus brings light to the darkness.

And with this leper Jesus shows his willingness to cleanse us:

**John 6:37-40** “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

When we run to Jesus, with all of our sin, all of our defilement, all of our uncleanness, we can expect complete and total cleansing. He never casts out anyone who really comes to Him.

Everybody expected Jesus to cast out the leper - you don't go near a holy man if you're unclean with leprosy. But Jesus not only didn't cast him out, Jesus touched him and cleansed him.

If you think, “I'm the type of sinner Jesus doesn't cleanse,” He says here that if you repent, there is no such type. The only sinner Jesus doesn't cleanse is the one who clings to his sin and doesn't run to Jesus! No, he doesn't forgive if you're not willing to turn from the sin. If you're trying to keep the leprosy and add Jesus to your life it isn't going to work. But regardless of how bad or destructive or persistent your sin has been, if you confess it and renounce it and run to Him, you can expect to meet only with willingness to heal.

If your whole identity and reputation has been mixed in with your sin, it feels like part of you, it feels like it will cling to you, it feels like it isolates you because you could never confess it to anyone, if you feel like much of your life is solitary and secret, that you can't get too close to people, Jesus will cleanse all who come to Him and bow.

Don't think He can't cleanse you.

And as followers of Jesus, *we follow Him.*

Jesus reached out to the most defiled to heal. And our calling in the world is to bring light in a similar way. Often we treat the sins of others like a disease we could pick up if we're

not careful to keep ourselves sufficiently isolated. Where if we have to go out and get around them, we will, but only for a few minutes, then we're trying to get back to the church folks really quickly to keep from getting infected.

We are sent to touch the lepers to see the lepers healed, not to stay away from them to keep ourselves clean.

We tend to err on the side of safety, when I think the calling here is to err on the side of mercy and care and grace. Church culture in general is very safe, very unwilling to take risks to further God's kingdom, and tends toward bubble-boy living where we're never around "sinful" unbelievers.

Religious people have always tended toward the safety of separation. The Pharisees in Jesus day, the most religious guys, name means, "Separated ones." But Jesus gets close to the broken, the sinful, the hurting, and the defiled. He brings light to the darkness.

And Jesus said to us:

**Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."**

So we can get out, get close to the hurting and broken and lost, and know that in our day, cleanness contaminates the unclean. Light drives out the darkness.

OK, but if this message is meant to be spread, why does this next thing happen?

**14 And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them."**

Why did he say not to say anything to anyone else? ("Hide it under a bushel? Yes!")

Why not, "Go show everybody!"

Showing himself to the priest was prescribed by the law of God for someone to get their cure certified. This was so they could be completely restored to society. So Jesus wants this guy to do things right, go through the right process, so he can be fully restored in society.

He is also forcing the issue with religious leaders. They are going to have to deal with Jesus and wrestle with who He is. They're going to have a certified miracle on their hands and have to make a decision about Jesus. So it's no surprise that in the next section, for the first time, Pharisees and Teachers of the law are part of the crowd gathered around Jesus. He has sparked their curiosity.

So going to the religious leaders and nobody else was good for the leper, it was strategic to get the good news to the top of the religious world quickly.

On top of that, Jesus wants his miracles to do good for people. He wants them to speak to people. But He doesn't want crowds to be drawn just because of miracles. He gets frustrated when people are following just because He multiplies bread, for example.<sup>3</sup> He wants His words to be the center of His ministry.

**15 But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. 16 But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.**

Jesus was obviously famous at this point. But He doesn't throw wood on that fire. His aim isn't more fame right now, a bigger platform, more power. When things are going really well He withdraws.

And over and over Jesus prays. He is true God, but also true man, and was always perfectly dependent on His Father for strength and power and holiness and focus. And he would leave the crowds, even crowds that really needed Him and that He could really help, and he would do what was even more important, He would pray.

There is no being light in darkness without a relationship with the Father. To keep from being overcome by darkness, Jesus would withdraw and pray. So how much more do we need that?

**17 On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. 18 And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, 19 but finding no way to bring him in, because of the**

---

<sup>3</sup> See John 6:26



**crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus.**

So while Jesus is preaching, there is some noise above them. These houses had rigid tile roofs that you could go up on, but the tiles could be removed. And these guys go up on the roof, remove a tile, and lower the paralyzed man on a mat right in front of Jesus.

*We've had interruptions during sermons here, but nothing like this.* As a teacher, you try to ignore a lot of the normal distractions in a crowd. I'm sure Jesus was used to babies crying, some shuffling around, people leaving the room.

But sometimes the distraction is just too big to ignore and you can see that everybody has disengaged from what you're saying and started to pay attention to that and you just have to acknowledge it. Like the time a couple of years ago that we had a bird flying around in here - there's no competing. This is now the focus of everybody in the room.

So Jesus is teaching, and there's noise on the roof, daylight comes in, and a paralyzed guy is being lowered on a mat.

And as much as Jesus put a high priority on the preaching of the word of God, this commotion on the roof is clearly where the attention is going. So they're all looking up, and the guy is lowered on a mat right in front of them, and Jesus presses pause on the sermon to deal with it.

**20a And when he saw their faith,**

This is cool to see what Jesus sees here. If I were speaking and something like this happened, I would see an interruption. I would see some people who obviously don't care too much about the Bible, some people who don't understand how important what I'm saying is, who don't care that I just put 20 hours of study time into this sermon.

But Jesus sees their faith. And that's what stands out to Him. Repeatedly in the life of Jesus, you don't see Jesus treating people as interruptions to the reason He's here, but as the reason he's here. He was as devoted to the word of God as anyone, He was a scholar, He studied, He knew the power and authority of God's word. But he wasn't a cold academic. He was here for people.

Ministry is always people work. A lot of times people get into ministry with the hope that they'd be able to study all the time. And you do get to study and should study. But ministry is always people work.

So Jesus looks and sees the good in what they're doing - they're bringing a person to Jesus, and yes it interrupted, yes he lost the attention of the audience. But they were bringing a person to Jesus - and he loved the faith that he saw.

Because our church just had our ten year anniversary, we've been pretty reflective. And ten years ago we were in the German house, we all knew each other, and then the church grew. And it would be easy for us to say, "this really wrecks it - we used to all know each other, I used to have the whole church over for dinner, now it's different because there are so many people." Yep, it's different. But it's different because of people who have come because of faith in Jesus.

And people aren't the ones who wreck the church, they're a big reason we are the church - to glorify God and spread a passion for Jesus to people.

We might see people as an interruption to what we wanted, Jesus looks up and sees faith - the faith of the men who carry their friend to see Jesus.

**20b he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."**

This is confusing and probably not what he expected.

This wasn't what he wanted. He has been humiliated, lowered helpless on this mattress in front of all of the leaders in town, he's laying on a floor in front of everybody, and Jesus says, "I'm here to help: your sins are forgiven."

While he lays there.

Not what he was looking for.

In this guy's mind, his biggest need was physical healing. His biggest problem in life was that he was paralyzed. He had spent his life watching friends run around while he laid on a mattress. They grew up and got married. He was carried to their weddings, unable to walk on his own. He had to have people bathe him and feed him and provide for him.

If only I could walk, then I'd be happy - he surely thought that. If I weren't paralyzed, all of my problems would go away, the world would open up to me, and I'd have the peace I'm after.

But Jesus, shockingly, says his first need is elsewhere.

Jesus, in a sense, says, "Yeah, I could make you walk. But that isn't your biggest need."

We're all like that: we think we know what we really need, we ask God for it, we pursue it, and sometimes we get it. But it never does it for us.

*We're like people walking through a desert, seeing a mirage up on the horizon, and we think that if we finally get to that valley up there, then we'll be able to quench our thirst. So we walk in the hot sun, we get to the valley, and it's only sand. But still, somehow we trust our own eyes, and look up on the horizon and see another mirage and think, "When I just get there, then I won't be thirsty." But over and over again, it's only sand.*

And the surprising thing Jesus says to this paralytic and to us is, "Don't trust your eyes. Don't trust your assessment of your biggest need. You've always been wrong about it, and everytime you get what you thought you really needed, it only satisfied temporarily."

So Jesus says, "You think you know what you really need. But I know better than you. I'm going to help you - but I'm going to really help you where you really need it. What you feel you need isn't your deepest need.

Jesus knows our hearts. And he knows that our problem is always a bigger and deeper one than we perceive.

We go to God thinking we know what we need, begging for an answer. But we are looking for salvation in all the wrong places. And he is kind enough to give us what we need, not what we think we need.

So Jesus forgives the sins of the paralyzed man.

Which is a surprise to the paralyzed man, but it is a shock to the religious leaders who were there.

**21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"**

These people recognize that Jesus is making an outlandish claim by saying the guy's sins are forgiven. Jesus is putting himself in the place of God! Who can forgive sins but God alone? Right! And here is Jesus forgiving sins.

And not only was that claim shocking - but Jesus made the shocking claim that this guy, who had done nothing, had his sins forgiven.

To get sins forgiven, you go to the temple. You offer a sacrifice. This guy is on the family room floor. But Jesus says it's done - this guy didn't do anything, he was lowered on a mattress and Jesus pronounced his sins forgiven with no good works whatsoever.

And this is a beautiful picture of the Gospel: we have nothing to offer Jesus, no hope without him, and not because we did anything, he saves us when we have faith in Him.

The religious leaders are shocked, and they question this outlandish claim.

**22 When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?"**

What is Jesus saying by asking this question?

Part of what He is saying is that it is much easier to say to someone your sins are forgiven than to say "Get up and walk." If you claim someone's sins are forgiven, there is no immediate surface indication of whether your claim was true.

So anyone can say, "I'm God and I'll prove it - your sins are forgiven! Pow! See, I'm God!" You can't be proven wrong in that claim. So in that way, saying "Your sins are forgiven" is easy. There's not way to probe you wrong.

On the other hand, if you say, "I'm God, and I'll prove it by healing this paralyzed man!" and then you don't heal him, you have been proven to be a liar. It's hard to say, "Get up and walk," it's easy to claim sins are forgiven.

So the religious leaders are outraged, and immediately dismissing Jesus in their minds. He's a crazy cult leader, claiming to be God. He's completely full of himself. These crowds may be amazed with Jesus, but we know our bibles. We are not impressed.

But then Jesus shocks everyone:

**24 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--he said to the man who was paralyzed--"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." 25 And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. 26 And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today."**

Now what do we do with Jesus? He just healed a guy who was unhealable. He doesn't just talk a good game – he healed the guy. He said the harder thing – take up your bed and walk, and the guy did it.

Now it's a lot harder to say Jesus is full of it when he forgives sins and claims to be God. If this is just crazy talk, how do you explain the healing?

So they're in awe.

We, too, can stand in awe of Jesus:

Who runs toward the darkness to offer forgiveness of sin to a world that thinks we need something more than that.

Who gives His life for our sin, accepting our sin and giving us His righteousness.

Who gets close to the hurting and defiled and offers real peace with God.

Who offers to meet the deepest need of our hearts. Not what we think is our deepest need. But the one He knows we need.

Scriptures Referenced:

John 1:9

Luke 5:12

Luke 5:13a

2 Corinthians 5:21

Luke 5:13b  
John 6:37-40  
Matthew 5:14-16  
Luke 5:14  
Luke 5:15-16  
Luke 5:17-19  
Luke 5:20a  
Luke 5:20b  
Luke 5:21  
Luke 5:22-23  
Luke 5:24-26

Sermon Notes:

Luke 5:12-16  
Jesus Meets Desperation

- I. Jesus Meets the Unclean (Luke 5:12-15)
  - A. Good news for us
  - B. A calling for us
- II. Jesus Meets the Desperate (Luke 5:16-26)
  - A. Shows our deepest need
  - B. Shows His power to meet it

Sermon Discussion Questions for Small Groups:

1. How does Jesus touching the leper give us a pattern for our mission?
2. How do we balance getting close to those in need of Christ with avoiding relationships that could lead us astray?
3. How much should we fear being contaminated by sin?
4. Why is forgiveness of sins considered to be unimportant by many in our day?
5. How is it significant to our mission that Jesus meets physical and spiritual needs?