

Lesson 2

The Cleansed Leper

Mark 1.38-45

Introduction

NO OTHER DISEASE REDUCES A HUMAN BEING FOR SO MANY YEARS TO SO HIDEOUS A WRECK.⁹

In the ancient world almost nothing compared to the devastation of leprosy, which reduced its victim to the most pitiful state of existence. During the time of Jesus, it was widespread in Palestine. The disease was met with superstition and fear. It led a person to the deepest physical, emotional, and mental anguish. Its dread is captured in Leviticus:

“The person who has a case of serious skin disease is to have his clothes torn and his hair hanging loose, and he must cover his mouth and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’ He will remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He must live alone in a place outside the camp.

– Leviticus 13.45-46

The magnitude of being a leper involved far more than its physically devastating capabilities. The disease took away a person’s occupation, normal daily life, and physical and spiritual family. Lepers were completely banished from society and treated “as if they were in effect dead persons.”¹⁰ Commenting on Miriam’s leprosy in Numbers 12.12 prompted some rabbis to speak of lepers as “the living dead,” whose cure was as difficult as raising the dead.¹¹ The Jewish rabbis of Jesus’ day added to the burden. If a leper stuck his head inside someone’s house, the entire house became unclean.¹² It was illegal to even greet a leper. If they were upwind of a person, they had to remain 100 cubits (around 150 feet) away from anyone else. If they were downwind, they could be within 4 cubits (about six feet) of another person. This is the ultimate in social distancing!

Physically, leprosy brings numbness to the extremities, including the ears, eyes, and nose. One could place his hand into a fire, wash their face with scalding water, or do unspeakable damage to themselves in a vast array of activities, all while feeling no pain. Among the worst cases, vermin have been known to chew on sleeping lepers. One doctor mentioned how, after performing surgery on a leper, he would send a cat home with the patient. On top of the numbness, the disease brought with it spongy, tumorlike lesions on the face and body. As the disease progresses, it impacts the internal organs as well as making

⁹ E. W. G. Masterman as quoted by Barclay, William. *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark*. The New Daily Study Bible. Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001, p. 48.

¹⁰ Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987, Antiquities 3.264.

¹¹ Edwards, James R. *The Gospel according to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002, p. 69.

¹² Neusner, Jacob. *The Mishnah : A New Translation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988, Neg. 13.7-9.

the bones brittle. The man in Mark 1 is mentioned as having “leprosy all over him,” Luke 5.12, and would have been mutilated from head to toe, rotten, stinking, and repulsive.¹³

During Jesus’ time, those in the ancient near east saw leprosy as a sign that someone had been “touched” by a demon. While the Old Testament never describes leprosy as the work of demons, Scripture does show leprosy as a punishment for sin.¹⁴ The Dead Sea Scrolls also speak of leprosy as divine punishment. In rabbinic circles, leprosy was considered the punishment for slander, “one of the most reprehensible sins.”¹⁵ Lepers are listed in the catalogue of transgressors and connected to an evil spirit which interferes with the flow of blood.¹⁶ With the Jews, the more pressing concern with leprosy was not the haunting physical impact, it was a matter of sin and religious purity. Edwards writes: “other illnesses had to be healed, but leprosy had to be *cleansed*.”¹⁷ Any hope of healing was left in the hands of God. If healing came, the emphasis in the Jewish religious texts was on the proper purification after God had moved with mercy, forgiven the sin, and healed the disease.¹⁸

The Leper Approaches Jesus with the Desire to be Set Free

Then a man with leprosy came to him and, on his knees, begged him, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

– Mark 1.40

The wording here should not be passed over lightly. When Mark says the leper begged Jesus, it is written in such a way to reveal that he was saying this over and over again: *If you are willing, you can make me clean. If you are willing you can make me clean. If you are willing you can . . . make me clean.* This is the supreme act of desperation. We can imagine that he has tried everything. He has been to every doctor. He has seen the priest. Now, he has heard about Jesus who was going all around Galilee preaching, healing the sick, and casting out demons.¹⁹ Jesus is his last, best, and only hope.

So, he moves with boldness. He violates every social protocol. Every Old Testament passage as well as rabbinical prohibition is ignored. As he approaches, you can almost see the crowd dispersing around him – he would have literally parted the crowd as everyone tried to get away. There is not one obstacle that he won’t overcome to get himself in front of Jesus. When he reaches Him, he stumbles to the ground and flattens himself . . . in humble adoration of the King. In Matthew’s account we read of his addressing

¹³ Hughes, R. Kent. *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*. Preaching the Word. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989, p. 54.

¹⁴ Uzziah, king of Judah, 2 Kings 15; 2 Chronicles 26; Miriam, sister of Moses, Numbers 12. God threatened Israel with leprosy if they disobeyed Him. He would smite them with boils, scabs, and itches, Deuteronomy 28.27; Leviticus 26.21. He also threatened to damage their houses with leprosy, Leviticus 14.34. Job’s friends assumed God had smitten Job with leprosy because of the boils on his skin, Job 11.6, 22.5.

¹⁵ Jewish Quarterly Review. 71, 1980, p. 36.

¹⁶ 4Q266 2-3.

¹⁷ Edwards, p. 69.

¹⁸ Harrington, Hannah K. *The Purity Texts*. Vol. 5. Companion to the Qumran scrolls. London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004, p. 92.

¹⁹ See Mark 1.34, 37-39.

Jesus as Lord, 8.2. This is a recognition of his unworthiness and an acknowledgment of Jesus' power. Look at his statement again:

“If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

There is no doubt in his mind that Jesus *can* save him, it is only Jesus' *willingness* that is left to question. His theological understanding may have been lacking, but thinking practically, he knew that if Jesus had healed others, He could do it for him. But, if Jesus were not willing, he is also content to remain in his condition and go to his death.

The hesitation in the leper's request would have been quite natural, thinking of the religious climate of the day. However, for us our requests should be made to Jesus without any hesitation for He has revealed His heart by the teaching of the Scriptures:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

– Mark 10.45

After harnessing people in their sin, Satan pumps the heart with one of two lies. One is that sin hasn't tainted them and that they are better than other people. In this he convinces them that they have no sin. The other lie is exactly the opposite. He says, “you've sinned too much. You've gone too far. There is no hope and it is useless to try.” If there ever were a story that destroys these two lies it has to be this story of the leper.

Jesus' Response

Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. “I am willing,” he told him. “Be made clean.”

– Mark 1.41

Notice, if you will, the three ways that Jesus responds: with the **heart**, with physical **touch**, and with reassuring **words**.

First, let's focus on the first part of the verse. The CSB translates the text as *moved with compassion*. The translation is filled with difficulty.²⁰ No matter whether the wording is translated compassion or with indignation, the emotion being described here is one that impacts a person to the core. Jesus' reaction goes beyond pity, sympathy, or empathy. He felt it in his stomach. Regarding this Lenski writes:

it implies not only a pained feeling at the sight of suffering but in addition a strong desire to relieve or to remove the suffering. Jesus' heart was ever filled with merciful kindness and feelings of pity for the distressed of every description. Whenever and wherever suffering and sorrow of body or soul met his eyes, he was moved with the will to help. The compassion of Jesus is one of the deepest, richest, most comforting of all his Savior qualities.²¹

²⁰ Some early manuscripts read, “moved with anger.” This is reflected in the contemporary versions like the NIV and CEB, etc. The NIV says Jesus was “indignant.” The CEB says Jesus was “Incensed.”

²¹ Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961, p. 91.

Jesus then touches the leper, bringing himself into full contact with someone who was untouchable by all accounts. *How long had it been since another human had touched this man?* This is something we see throughout Mark's depiction of Jesus' ministry:

- Jesus took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand when he raised her up, 1.31.
- Jesus placed his hand upon the leper, 1.41.
- Jesus took the daughter of Jairus by the hand when He raised her from the dead, 5.41.
- He laid his hands on sick people, 6.5.
- Jesus placed his finger inside the deaf and dumb man's ears and touched the man's tongue, 7.33.
- He took the blind man by the hand, 8.23.
- He took little children into His arms, 9.36; 10.16.
- He raised up the boy who had a demon, 9.27.²²

In this we see Jesus' heart. He loved to help people. He wanted people to feel his love and sympathy. He was willing to touch someone who no one else would even come near. He is willing to touch the untouchable.

Finally, we hear the words Jesus spoke. "I am willing. Be made clean." He has the authority and power to act ... and act He will. The leper could not have heard more beautiful words.

The Miracle

Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

– Mark 1.42

Here is one of Mark's favorite words: *Immediately*. One moment this man is on his face on the ground before Jesus, a dead man rotting away, the next moment his is fully cleansed, and healthy. There is no period of recovery or restoration. Of this MacArthur writes:

His sores were gone. His limbs were made whole. His skin looked like new. His face was smooth and unscarred. Even in an age of modern medical marvels, nothing can compare to this kind of miraculous healing. Though medical advancements have made it possible to control the symptoms of leprosy, they cannot cure the disease or reverse its effects. Jesus could and He did so instantly.²³

How Jesus Saw This Man

Although very brief, Mark 1.41-42 speaks volumes about our Savior. Here we see:

- **Jesus' refusal to drive a person who had broken the law.** In a time of rescue and restoration, urgency demands no questions be asked of how the person got into the situation.
- **Jesus touched the untouchable.** To Jesus, the man was not defiled and unclean, His first inclination was to see the man as a human who was in desperate need. Jesus was willing to go where others would never go.

²² Hughes, p. 58.

²³ MacArthur, John. *Mark 1–8*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015, p. 90.

- **Once he was healed, Jesus told the man to submit to the specifications of the law.** Jesus' mission was not to destroy the law, but fulfill it, Matthew 5.17. He did not recklessly defy the conventions, but, when need be, submitted to them. *Here we see compassion, power, and wisdom all at work together.*²⁴

For the 21st Century

There is a reason why this story is mentioned in each synoptic gospel. It is a story of one man's faith, despite all the odds, who had every human reason to give up. It is a story of our Savior's love and willingness to outstretch His saving hand to the greatest length. No one is outside His grasp.

- **What really matters is simple trusting faith.** This man had heard about the work of Jesus, the nature of his healings, and was convinced. Moved by conviction, he did whatever he had to do to get to the Person who could unlock him from the very personal prison he occupied. His faith in Jesus' power was so strong that it moved him to action. Theological depth of knowledge is important and spiritual growth in this area is required, but we must never get away from the foundation upon which it is all built: faith in the person and power of Jesus Christ.
- **Jesus wants to help.** If we are to believe the early manuscripts regarding Jesus being indignant when the leper approached, then we can trust in His going on offense to right the wrongs inflicted upon us by the evil one. While we are each responsible for our sin, we must remember we are but flesh, whose weakness is exploited by the one who has made war on the sons and daughters of God. Jesus has come to make all things new and to right all the wrongs Satan created. *The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil's works,* 1 John 3.8b.
- **We will never be able to impact the lives of others until we reach out to and identify with them.** We must be willing to get involved with those we wish to help. It has been said that people don't care about what you know until they understand how much you care.

Sometimes a touch, caring involvement, will do a thousand times more than our theology. This is what all churches need to do. We are great in theory. We are careful about our doctrine. But we need to lay our hand on some rotting flesh in our neighborhood, in the executive towers where we work, in the city slums. We cannot expect this to be only the job of missionaries because a church which does not regularly place its hand on the rotting humanity around it will not be sending missionaries to do so either.²⁵

For Thought and Reflection

1. What were the Levitical expectations for a leper living during Old Testament times?

²⁴ Barclay, p. 51.

²⁵ Hughes, p. 59.

2. Why was leprosy often associated with divine judgment?

3. If a person came down with leprosy, what was his or her only hope?

4. How does Mark's account of the leper's begging of Christ accentuate the drama of the situation?
How intense was the leper's request?

5. What kind of faith do you observe as you read the leper's request? What does this tell you about the type of faith we need to have?

6. If Jesus was "angry," as some of the early manuscripts record, to whom or what was He angry?
How does this change your perspective on the text?

7. What stands out to you most about Jesus' response in 1.41?

8. How quickly did the cleansing take place? What can we learn from this?

9. What is the significance of Jesus touching the man?

10. Besides those listed, are there any other lessons of faith we can take away from this lesson?