



Mark 1:40-45
The Leper Who Couldn't Keep a Secret

Summary: A man in a tragic situation has desperate faith and appeals Christ's compassion.

Here in America, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) sponsors a study tracking risky behaviors in youth. Every two years they publish their findings. The most recent data, which came out two weeks ago, found that things are bad, really bad. Today *most* teenage girls (57%) – nearly 6 in 10 – say they experience persistent sadness and hopelessness and half of that group (30%) – 3 in 10 – have seriously considered suicide. These numbers are almost twice as high as they were in 2011. Boys are trending poorly too, but their rates are not as high and their increase since 2011 is not as steep.

These are not cold statistics, they're not just numbers. These are our sisters, daughters, granddaughters, nieces, and their friends. These are the girls in your dance studio, in our youth group, in your third period Spanish class, and working the drive-thru at Chick-Fil-A.

What's going on? Well, consider that adults aren't doing that well themselves. We're seeing record levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicide across the nation. Today adults are more angry and less resilient. Why?

There have been many attempts to explain the data, but if you dive down deep enough, I believe it's all related to this: we're being crushed by the internet, suffocated by technology. We have not yet learned to reckon with the flood of information, opinions, and opportunities that constantly pour into our lives. We are data drunk, and like a drunk, we respond in unhealthy ways.

Whether you tend toward depression or anger, here's what's going on: we all carry a supercomputer in our pocket now so we can hear everyone – we even have alerts and notifications and subscriptions because we've got FOMO – fear of missing out. We can hear everyone, but we wonder if anyone is listening to us. We can see everyone, but we wonder if anyone sees us. And if they do, do they care? Do they care that I'm over here thinking and feeling and speaking and living too?

Whether you're a fourteen-year-old white girl or a seventy-year-old Asian man, we all want to know we're seen and heard. We want to know we're connected and we matter. *And that is why Jesus is so amazing* – He sees you. Church, listen to me, Jesus sees you. He hears you, He knows you...and He cares. Yes, God so loved the world that gave His Son to be our savior, but He doesn't just see the world. He doesn't just see the masses. He doesn't just see the crowds. *He sees you.*

And, He doesn't just see the pretty people. He doesn't just see the good people. He doesn't just see the people who have it all together – the people who are going places and doing things. Jesus sees you. He hears you. And He cares.

Read the Scriptures and you see Jesus engaging with the least, the lonely, and the lost, and this morning, a leper (pretty convenient that starts with an L too). But that's what we'll see as we turn back to Mark's gospel: a desperate man who is seen, heard and helped by Jesus who, in a shocking display of compassion touches an untouchable man and brings him back into community and relationship.

As we examine the text here's what I hope you'll be thinking about – *how is this man like me?* What do I have in common with a leper? The answer is: more than you might think.

To set the background – Jesus is out on a speaking tour – He's traveling through the small towns and villages of northern Israel and at some point, we don't know exactly when or where, this happened:

Mark 1:40 Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean."

Do you hear? Do you hear him asking Jesus, "Do you see me? Do you care?" And, "Will you help?" If you're taking notes this morning, I've got five things I hope to show you.

1. A Tragic Situation

The Scriptures call this man a leper. You might not know this but leprosy is still a thing. As recently as 2016 there were several hundred new cases diagnosed in America and upwards of 200,000 cases globally that year alone. It's often referred to as Hansen's disease now, named after the doctor who identified the bacteria that causes it. We had a leper colony in Louisiana for over a hundred years until it closed in 1999 and there is still a community of people living with the disease on a section of an island in Hawaii.

We're not sure this man actually had Hansen's disease though. The term leprosy in Scripture was used for a variety of illnesses affecting the skin. But, the exact medical diagnosis isn't essential for us. What we need to know is that he had a skin disease that was obvious to others, and it radically transformed his life.

Luke, who was a doctor by trade, also records this man's story in his gospel. And Dr Luke says the man was "full of leprosy" – so whatever it was had spread over the man's body.

As a result, he would have to live in relative isolation because, as every COVID-trained armchair epidemiologist knows – social distancing helps slow the spread. After what we've lived through since 2020 it's interesting to go back to Leviticus 13 and see what God said about lepers:

Leviticus 13:45 Now the leper on whom the sore *is*, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare; and he shall cover his mustache, and cry, “Unclean! Unclean!” 46 He shall be unclean. All the days he has the sore he shall be unclean. He *is* unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling *shall be* outside the camp.

Now, I want you to imagine COVID lockdowns without the internet. No Netflix or YouTube. No Amazon or online shopping. No meal or grocery delivery services and you’re actually sick and can’t interact with anyone who doesn’t also have the disease and you have no hope of ever getting better.

Some of you will know the story of Naaman – he was like the Chief of Staff for the army of ancient Syria – and he came down with leprosy. But he had enslaved a little Jewish girl who told him he should find the prophet Elisha because maybe God could cleanse him.

So, the king of Syria sends a letter to the king of Israel and says, “Help my general.” And the king of Israel, who’s not where he should be in his relationship with God gets the letter and he’s like – “I can’t do this. No one just heals a leper! I can’t stop death. And now the Syrians are going to come down and fight me because we won’t help.”

But Elisha hears about it and basically the king, “Hey, chill out. It’s not your problem. Let’s see what God wants to do.” And God does cleanse the man by humbling him. That’s another story, but the point is this – the diagnosis was seen as incurable and terminal unless you got a miracle.

If you didn’t, you had to deal with the physical pain and discomfort of the disease, but also the mental and emotional anguish of being completely cutoff from others. Remember, lepers were banished from their home, family, and community. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus says that in the first century culture, lepers were treated like dead men. We have ancient writings where a rabbi boasted that he wouldn’t buy an egg on a street that a leper had walked down. Others threw rocks at lepers like wild dogs to keep them away.

So imagine, at the time you need people most, you’re cut off from everyone – you can’t participate in social or even religious gatherings. But you can watch, from a distance, as everyone else moves on with their lives as if nothing was wrong. Perhaps you can understand why my second point is, the man had

2. A Desperate Faith

Notice, he comes to Jesus, imploring Him, begging Him, beseeching Him. He falls on his knees and put his face to the ground in front of Jesus. He is desperate for help.

And that’s the key to lasting change: crisis and desperation. You might know something needs to change. You need to quit doing this, or start doing that. You know what needs to happen. Maybe you’ve researched alternatives and options. Maybe you even purchased some equipment or bought a subscription or a book. But you won’t really change until

Copyright The City Gates Church, 2023. Authorized for personal use only.

you're desperate. And that person you care about is not going to change until they're desperate either. The key to lasting change is crisis and desperation.

This man realizes he's out of options. He has no place else to go. No one on earth who can help Him. He's having that Princess Leia moment – Help me Obi-Wan, you're my only hope.

Friends, I need you to hear me on this, really hear me – the only way you're going to change, the only way you're going to overcome your addiction, your anxiety, your anger, your lust for pleasure or love of food – whatever keeps creeping up on you, slipping you into a headlock – whatever keeps taking control of your life. The only way you're going to gain true and lasting victory is to come to a crisis, recognize your desperation, and turn to Jesus as your only hope.

Not your extra strength. Not part of the solution. Not an alternative or option or possibility. If you want real, durable, lasting change – Jesus is your only hope. When you believe that, and you're willing to come to Him with desperate faith, change can happen – it may be total and instant or it may be steady and slow, but if it's going to be real and last, it will only be because it's built on Jesus. It's going to be you, submitting to Him, surrendering to Him, saying, "I can't do this without You, *even if I try to do it for You*, Jesus."

You won't fully appreciate the good news of the gospel until you realize how much you need it.

But now marvel with me: the message made it to this man. Somehow, this leper who was shut out of society, who wasn't allowed into the synagogue, this man that people threw rocks at and ignored; somehow, the gospel still reached him. He heard of Jesus. We don't know how, or where. But he heard, and he had desperate faith – that Jesus could help. He was capable.

But was He willing? The man had to know, so [He] ... came to [Jesus], imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean."

Mark 1:41 Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out *His* hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." 42 As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.

Church, look at what happens when a man with a tragic situation and desperate faith finds,

3. The Compassion of Christ

The longer you stare at this scene, the more you meditate on it, the more moving it becomes. A man who is utterly desperate begging Jesus, bowing down before Him, humbling himself and asking for help. Wouldn't you love to see Jesus' face as He reaches out to touch the man and says, *I am willing, be cleansed*!?!

Jesus doesn't throw rocks at him. Jesus doesn't turn away from him. Jesus doesn't see him coming and look busy. Jesus doesn't say, "Well, you got what you had coming." No. Jesus sees the man. Jesus hears the man. Jesus has compassion on the man. Jesus sees the soul inside that broken that body. He sees the man inside that tattered frame. This is the same Jesus who said,

John 6:37 All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.

And because of that, I have great confidence in telling you – Jesus sees you too. Jesus hears you. Jesus cares about you. He is compassionate and He is willing to help. If you feel like you can see everyone, but wonder if anyone sees you, *Jesus does*. If you can hear everyone but wonder if anyone hears you, *Jesus does*. If you wonder if anyone cares, or is paying attention, *Jesus does*.

In fact, Jesus is always issuing this invitation. He says:

Matt 11:28 Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Luke 18:16 Let the little children **come to Me**, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God.

John 7:37 If anyone thirsts, let him **come to Me** and drink.

Come, come, come and find the compassion of Christ. This is the call of the church. This is the call of the Holy Spirit. This is the call of Jesus. At the very end of Scripture, we read:

Revelation 22:17 ... the Spirit and the bride say, "**Come!**" And let him who hears say, "**Come!**" And let him who thirsts **come**. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

There are only four more sentences until the end of the Bible. Everywhere you look, God is saying *come to Jesus*. He is compassionate, He is merciful, He cares. He will pour His attention out on you. And it all starts by cleansing you.

4. Miraculous Cleansing.

I need you to notice something important here – the Bible doesn't say Jesus healed the leper. It says Jesus **cleansed** him. That's peculiar on purpose. It's the language used throughout Scripture. People are not *healed* of leprosy, they're **cleansed**. The leper said *if You're willing You can make me clean*.

It's an important distinction because in Scripture to be clean is about more than physical hygiene, it's about status. Things that were unclean were to be avoided, things that were

Copyright The City Gates Church, 2023. Authorized for personal use only.

clean were OK. You could be sick or injured and still be clean – think of someone who is blind or deaf, they were not expelled from their community and relationships like the leper. There was no permanent separation for most injuries and illnesses.

This man is not just asking to be relieved from his physical wounds and pain, he wants to be restored to relationships. He wants to know that he is seen and heard – he wants to be connected to God and people again. He wants to have neighbors and family and friends. He wants to walk down the street and buy an egg and say hi to the rabbi. He wants to be brought back into the fold.

Which is why there's emphasis here on the fact that Jesus **touched** him. How long had it been since that happened? How long since he was **touched**? Personally, I give my kids frequent and ferocious hugs because I want them to know they're loved. I kiss my wife all the time because I want her to know that she's seen and heard and loved. Of all the people in the world that she can hear and of all the people on earth that she can see – there's at least someone that sees her and hears her, and it's me. I do all of this for my family because of what Jesus has done for me.

But here's what sin does – sin separates. Sin divides. This is the picture we get in the first pages of Scripture when we find Adam and Eve. When they decide they know better than God and eat of the only tree that was off limits in the garden they become unclean – not physically, but spiritually, internally. And they're separated from God. There's a fracture in the relationship. And, when they're questioned about it, Adam accuses Eve – there's a fracture in their marriage. Adam also says he hid from God because he was afraid and ashamed – there's a fracture in his mind and heart, in his emotions.

Following our own path always leads to division. Sin makes lepers of us all. It divides marriages. Sin pulls parents away from children – siblings apart from each other. Sin is the source of conflict at work. It's the source of injustice in the world. It's the reason for corporate greed and political power grabs. And it's the reason why there's a part of you that you feel like you can't control or get over.

We need Jesus to make us **clean**, not just heal our physical injuries and illnesses, but bring us back into relationship, with Him first and then with everyone else as a result.

And here's the good news – not only is He **able** to do it, He is **willing** to do it. If you are dominated by the tragic illness of sin in your soul - and life, circumstances, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit have brought you to the place of desperate faith - you can discover the compassion of Christ and His miraculous cleansing.

He sees you. He hears you. He will touch you and things will change. Again, it may be sudden and complete like with the leper, or slow and steady – the pace and the process are up to Him – but He will not avoid you.

It is good news. It is the gospel. It's exciting! But, you still want to avoid making

Copyright The City Gates Church, 2023. Authorized for personal use only.

5. A Bad Choice

Mark 1:43 And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once, ⁴⁴ and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

⁴⁵ However, he went out and began to proclaim *it* freely, and to spread the matter, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction.

In his enthusiasm the man ignored what Jesus said. That caused some difficulty for Jesus, but it was also a missed opportunity for the man. He had the chance to become an exceptional evangelist, to witness to the priests, to share the gospel with them, *based on his own personal experience*, but he missed it.

You see, Jesus cared about the priests too. He saw them too. He heard them too. He wanted the good news to reach them too. And, eventually it would. No one can ever fully frustrate God’s plans. But this man missed a great chance to be God’s messenger.

Jesus said go tell the priest, and take with you those things Moses commanded. You can read what that should have looked like in Leviticus 14. It’s a multi-step process and it’s more than we have the time to get into right now, but here’s what you need to know: it ends with sacrificing a lamb at the Temple as a guilt offering. And then the priest is to take some of the blood from that lamb and put it on the right ear lobe of the man who was cleansed, and on his right thumb, and on the big toe of his right foot – symbolizing the man was cleansed by God and everything He heard (ear), did (hands) and everywhere He went (feet) was committed to God.

In other words, he was entirely restored, and entirely received *by God*, and therefore he should be received back into the community as well. It would have been shocking to the priest because, as those of you doing the Exodus study will shortly learn, it was the same thing God commanded to be done for Aaron when he became Israel’s first high priest.

Did you hear that? After a leper had been cleansed, he was to be consecrated *as if he was the high priest* and welcomed into the community.

This is exactly what happens to us through the gospel – we are cleansed by Jesus and then God sees us as if He were looking at His own Son, Jesus, our High Priest.

So, here’s what we’re going to do now. We’re going to remember that Jesus offers us healing and cleansing through His blood as we celebrate communion.

I’m going to ask the worship team to make their way forward, and we’re going to recite the Apostle’s Creed as a summary of the essential beliefs of the Christian faith, the things we

Copyright The City Gates Church, 2023. Authorized for personal use only.

believe are true about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We believe in the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and everlasting life for everyone who is cleansed by Jesus.

As part of the Creed, we declare our belief in one holy catholic church – that's not a reference to Roman Catholicism, the word actually just means universal – and it highlights the reason we're using the creed each month this year when we celebrate communion – by using the Creed and the doxology we're reminding ourselves that we're part of something historic and global, something older than us and bigger than us.

It's all part of what is glorious about the Christian faith – we are seen, heard, and touched personally by Jesus, but we're also wrapped up by and anchored in something ancient, enormous, global, and eternal.

So, join with me in declaring our common faith as we recite the Creed.

Let us confess our belief together:

I believe in God the Father
Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only-begotten Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary;
suffered under Pontius Pilate;

was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,

and sits at the right hand of
God the Father Almighty;
from there he shall come to judge
the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit;
the holy catholic (universal) church;
the communion (fellowship) of saints;

the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. Amen.

In light of your belief, we invite you forward to receive the elements for communion.

But if you need to, take a minute to ask Jesus to touch you this morning. If you want to, you can even come up front, take a knee off to the side, out of the way, and ask Him to make you clean. This is our Father's house and it's supposed to be a house of prayer. So, pray. Seek the Lord while He may be found. Ask Him to do for you what only He can do. Tell Him you are desperate.

He sees you. He hears you. He cares. He is able and He is willing to cleanse you and touch you.

Do you believe it?

Then come and receive.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 1:40-45

The Leper Who Couldn't Keep a Secret

Summary: A man in a tragic condition with desperate faith appeals to Christ's compassion.

- Who are the outcasts of our society? Who are the modern-day lepers?
 - o What makes you feel unseen or unheard?
 - o Who or what makes you feel seen or heard?
 - o How does Jesus make an difference for you?
- If you tried to talk to someone about Jesus and they said they didn't see how He would ever want anything to do with them, that He was only interested in a certain kind of people, how would you respond based on this passage?
- How does the social isolation of leprosy make the physical condition even worse?
 - o How has having people near you made difficult times easier to bear?
 - o What are some things you've learned about how to be near someone who is hurting in a way that brings comfort or encouragement?
- The leper was desperate, and Jeff said the key to lasting change is crisis. Do you agree or disagree? Is desperation necessary for true transformation?
 - o Reflect on a time when brokenness led to a breakthrough in your life. (If you're using these questions in a group, is it something you're willing to share?)
- Where, or how, have you learned to rely solely on Jesus for healing or help?
- Describe the emotion you sense in this interaction – who feels what?
- Read Leviticus 8:22-24 for the anointing of Aaron and his sons as priests.¹
 - o Read Leviticus 14:13-14 for the service recognized a cleansed leper.
 - o What does this tell you about how God now views the one who had been separated?

¹ Also described in Exodus 29:19-21