

Jesus Cleanses A Leper

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[0 : 0 0] The following sermon is made available by Lakeside Bible Church in Cornelius, North Carolina.

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We left our study last week having discovered that the fame of Jesus in Galilee and in that Galilean region has exploded.

Mark credits this explosion of popularity to the events of a particular 24-hour period in which Jesus demonstrated both his compassionate heart and his divine power.

[1 : 0 5] And he did so by healing an incredible amount of people who were sick and demon-possessed. And no doubt, as we discovered last week, it came as a surprise to the disciples when they discovered that Jesus did not want to remain in Capernaum to capitalize on the growing popularity, but instead decided that it was time to travel elsewhere in order that he might preach the gospel in other places.

Although he desired to heal the people, he had a much greater purpose that involved the preaching of the gospel. They needed to hear his message much more than they needed the temporary reprieve of physical healing.

And of course, Jesus wanted to provide both, but he had a clear priority of purpose. And he told the disciples when they're trying to pull him back to Capernaum, when all the people are searching him out in order that they may witness more healing, more miracles, Jesus decides to go to other places that he has not been.

And he says, I want to go there and I want to preach the gospel for that is why I came, he says in verse 38. And so we take that as an example for us.

Though we should have compassionate hearts for people around us, so we should desire to feed the poor, we should desire to care for the sick, we should desire to show compassion and pity toward those who are hurting, it is not the priority of our life.

[2 : 3 5] The priority of our purpose is to share the gospel. And of course, we want to do both of those things, but Jesus has given us a clear priority between the two. The text before us today serves as an appendix to those verses.

The verses from really verses 21 to 39, this is kind of like an appendix. Because chronologically, this event did not take place immediately following that incredible day in Capernaum.

Mark thought it best to include it here because it illustrates so clearly the points that he was making about Jesus' life in that 24-hour period, in the retelling of it.

Mark gives almost twice as much time to this event than either of the other gospel authors. Which is unusual for Mark, because typically he's moving very quickly.

Matthew doesn't cover this until chapter 8. Luke is well into chapter 5 at this point, 4 or 5 at this point. We're just getting into chapter 1 with Mark, and Mark is already at this point in the life of Jesus and in the events that he's recording of Jesus' life.

[3 : 42] For just a moment, Mark slows his blistering pace that he's following at this point in order that he may get us to really focus in on the truths that he is proclaiming about Jesus.

He identifies Jesus' power and compassion again. But those things are meant to be understood through the lens of the gospel. Not Jesus' philanthropic work.

Mark is not interested in us reading about the miracles of Jesus and considering how wonderful of a human being he was in regards to his compassion for healing the sick and helping care for people.

He wants us to view those things through the lens of Jesus' true purpose, which is a gospel purpose. We can be guilty often of processing the studies of Christ's miracles with the hope of physical healing in this life as our primary takeaway.

You know what I mean? We may come to a story like Jesus healing the leper, and we may think, well, goodness grief, if Jesus can heal Peter's mother-in-law's fever, surely he would be willing to heal these issues that I have with migraines.

[4 : 57] Or we come to the leper and we say, Jesus has this power to heal this leprous man. Surely Jesus has this desire to take away this cancer that I've been diagnosed with, or so on and so forth.

And it's not that those things are irrelevant, but we often take those as the primary takeaway of Jesus' miracles. That's not the point that they are recorded for us. Gospel authors didn't record the miracles to merely give us hope that Jesus would heal our sickness and disease.

That's not an irrelevant application, but it's not the point. If our tendency is to compare the man's leprosy in this passage to our own struggles with ailments and terminal diseases, then we have clearly missed the message that God wants for us to hear.

The miracles of Jesus are a shadow of a greater, eternal healing that only He can provide. They're not an end in and of themselves.

They are meant to point us to something greater, and that greater thing is the gospel. Therefore, the healing of the leper in Mark chapter 1 is primarily an analogy to the gospel. And so our takeaway as we come away from this passage is not to be, wow, I wonder if God will heal my sickness.

[6 : 16] No, the takeaway is, wow, God can heal the sickness of my soul. Kent Hughes said it this way, all Christ miracles were parables that visibly portrayed the effects of His Spirit's work among mankind.

Realizing then that Christ miracles were parables, not that they didn't actually happen, but that they were illustrations, we must note that leprosy was especially symbolic of sin and the healing of it, especially a parable of deliverance from sin.

So let's take a moment and look at how the healing of this leper is really about the gospel of salvation that is provided through Jesus Christ. We'll probably only get to the first part of it today, and we'll finish the rest next Sunday.

But let's first look at the man was cleansed. The man was cleansed. Now the setting is an unknown or unnamed town in Galilee, probably in the vicinity of Capernaum.

Jesus often, at this point in His ministry, really stayed around the home base. He hadn't yet ventured out to other places within Galilee. So it's probably near Capernaum, but it's a town that we're not told of.

[7 : 34] Matthew puts this account immediately following the Sermon on the Mount, and he says that it takes place as Jesus was, or after Jesus had descended from the mountain where He had taught.

Luke's account tells us that this took place openly in the midst of a certain city, not a rural location, but inside of a town. So Matthew says that a multitude of people had followed Jesus down from the mountain after His teaching, and the fact that this took place openly in a city tells us that it's almost guaranteed that there was a presence of a crowd whenever this took place, which is important for us to understand as we make these applications.

Perhaps the fear associated with this man's disease is what had cleared a path for him to get to Jesus and to interact with Him, but how the man got to Jesus was absolutely irrelevant to the Lord.

He didn't care. The fires of his compassionate heart were once again ignited as he desired to free this man from this disease.

Now, let's pause for just a second and compare what our response would likely be to this man versus how Jesus responded to this man. There were strict laws about what this man could do and could not do.

[8 : 58] He was in a place he was not allowed to be. He was not allowed to be around people. He has broken a number of not only biblical, but civil laws in his day in order to get to Jesus.

And he's, we'll get to it in a moment, is absolutely filthy. I mean, grotesque probably is the way that this man looked. And he's made his way to Jesus. Now, you may be better than me, but typically my response in the moment, as soon as something like that happens, is to not look compassionately on that individual, but say, how did you get here?

You're not supposed to be here. There's a way these things are supposed to happen, and this is not the way this is supposed to happen. And we immediately would cast judgment, maybe, on this man for being where he wasn't supposed to be, making everyone else susceptible to this thing that he has been.

But Jesus didn't care about all of that. He didn't care about how the man got to him. As soon as he sees him, the fires of his compassionate heart are fired for this man. All he wants to do now is to cleanse this man, heal them, and free him from this incredible disease.

Well, let's look at what takes place here first. Three things, if you're keeping track of your notes. But first thing, write this down. His hopeless condition. His hopeless condition.

[10 : 18] Look at verse 40, the very first phrase. And there came a leper to him. This man's condition was not simply urgent.

It was utterly hopeless. Biblical leprosy was known as an incurable and devastating skin disease.

There were various leprosies in the Bible. You can read about them in the Old Testament. Some of them are really akin to just minor skin irritations that we would even contract today.

And they weren't really that big of a deal. There was a way that they were supposed to go about determining that and figuring out what to do about it. But there were various leprosies. This one is a severe form of leprosy that was really terrible.

And it was terminal. There was no escaping it or escaping the death that it would bring. It began with various skin lesions on a person's body that would very slowly spread and gradually eat away the tissue of a person's body.

[11 : 24] There's a modern mutation of it that still exists today. It's called Hansen's disease. And in this particular mutation, the severest symptom is that an individual with Hansen's disease, or leprosy as they still call it, Hansen's disease, is that their nervous system is attacked rather than their skin.

So in their nervous system, their nerves literally become numb so that they have no way of alerting their brain to pain or to pleasure in either one of those experiences. A person with Hansen's disease could literally take their hand and put it on a piping hot stove and never realize that their hand is actually being burned away in that moment.

That's how most of the deformities probably came as a result. Not just these skin lesions that would eat away the flesh, but it was this numbness that they had. They could walk through a field, step in a hole to break their ankle and not feel any pain from that.

They would just readjust the way that they would walk from there on. And ultimately, over time, this would become absolutely devastating to them.

The Bible's acknowledgement of leprosy indicates that it was highly contagious. They'll tell you that Hansen's disease isn't quite as contagious, but clearly the way that God dealt with it in the Scripture, the form of it in those days, it was highly contagious.

[12 : 48] Easy to catch. The CDC states on their website that Hansen's disease, much like COVID-19, is spread through microscopic droplets that come from a person's nose and mouth.

So when we understand that and we read exactly how this was spread, it wasn't so much about the touch. It was about these droplets. Being near a person could be absolutely detrimental to your health. So we understand that.

We see that the Bible's command for distancing is actually completely understandable. R.K. Harrison wrote this. He's a commentator, an Old Testament scholar.

He said this. A diagnosis of leprosy was as much of a death sentence to the ancient Israelites as tidings about an advanced malignant cancer would be to a modern patient.

Once a man was branded as a leper, he had to adopt the posture of a mourner by tearing his clothes, allowing his hair to be unkempt, covering his beard and mustache, and crying unclean anytime someone came anywhere near his vicinity.

[13 : 52] He had to live outside the camp or perhaps in a leper colony. But his existence was nothing more than a living death.

Unless there was a quick remission of the disease, the victim of clinical leprosy knew that his condition would be of lengthy duration and that its loathsome nature would prohibit significant contact with society.

Most of all, Harrison says, the leper would be cut off from the spiritual fellowship with the covenant people and in a real sense would be without hope and God in the world.

Terrible disease. It wasn't merely an illness. It was a sentence. A leper not only lost their health, they lost their life without actually dying.

Even in Mark 1, this man has no name. He's completely defined by his disease. He would have lost his job.

[14 : 58] He would have lost his family. He would have lost his home, his friends, his community, his rights, and his freedom of worship. And no one would have had sympathy because they considered anyone that would have come down with leprosy was specifically being cursed by God for the sin of their life.

It was a living death. I want you to think about this. Think about everything that's going on in our current culture with COVID-19. There's fear.

I saw a statistic the other day that so far this year, there have been three times as many deaths as a result of COVID-19 in North Carolina alone than the flu in the last 10 years combined.

But even if you get COVID-19, right now the statistics say you've got a 99% chance of surviving the infection. If you got leprosy, you had a 100% chance that you would die.

You would die alone, and it would be slow and agonizing. This was the true condition of this man. It was hopeless.

[16 : 09] Now I want you to consider for just a moment your own hopeless condition. The Bible teaches that because of sin, we are literally the living dead.

Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 1 says that we are dead in our sins and trespasses. Not dying, we're dead. Not drowning, we're drowned.

Jesus said in John chapter 3 that sinners are not awaiting a coming condemnation, but they are condemned already. You may say, okay, I get that much.

I get my sins that is a problem. I get that there is a punishment for that sinfulness and that that punishment is severe. So what can I do to fix it? But that's just the thing. You can't do anything to fix it.

Nothing. There's no medicine that you can take that will heal your soul. There's no goodness that you could do that could possibly offset the sin.

[17 : 26] Any goodness that you would try to perform today is irrelevant in regards to the sins of yesterday. Everything that you've done up to this point, it cannot be remedied by anything that you can do.

Your condition isn't urgent. Your condition is hopeless. Literally. Hopeless.

But that brings us to the next note. We not only see his hopeless condition. Secondly, we see his desperate cry. His desperate cry. Look again at verse 40.

There came a leper to him, beseeching him, begging him, pleading with him. Kneeling down to him and saying to him, if you will, you can make me clean.

Mark's already revealed that Jesus' fame had spread rapidly throughout Galilee. Somehow, this man had heard about what Jesus had done for others.

[18 : 31] And he hoped that Jesus might do the same for him. There's a faith in this man in this moment. It's a hesitant faith.

He says, if you will, I know you can do this. But he seems uncertain as to whether or not Jesus actually will. He knows he can. He only sought for Jesus because he understood the reality of his own condition.

His hopeless condition led him to desperately plead for Jesus to save him from this terrible, terrible disease.

Have you ever noticed that the wealthy and well rarely sought for Jesus in the Bible? When they did, it wasn't usually for the right reasons either.

And they often walked away completely unchanged. We think of the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and Jesus loves him in that moment. And he just thinks that he's got his life together.

[19 : 42] He's not looking for Jesus to change his life. He doesn't view himself as sinful. He doesn't view himself as in need of forgiveness or of restoration. He really just wants Jesus to improve his already, as far as he's concerned, great life.

And Jesus tells him, one thing you're lacking. The one thing was kind of veiled in Jesus' instruction. The primary thing is that he wouldn't submit to the Lord.

He wouldn't acknowledge his own sinfulness. But Jesus says, sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and then come follow me. And the man walked away sad. He walked away from the Savior sad because he had great riches.

The well and the wealthy, they never sought Jesus. And if they did, it was for poor motives and they walked away unchanged most of the time. It's always desperate people that come to Jesus and receive salvation.

It's those who are completely exhausted by the futility of doing their best and trying their hardest that come with desperate hearts to the Savior.

[20 : 50] The problem for most people is that they don't realize how desperate for Jesus they truly are. But without acknowledging our own hopelessness in our sinful state, we will never receive salvation.

You'll probably not even admit that you needed it. But it is those who recognize their sinful condition as this leper that come to Jesus in a way that results in eternal salvation.

Think about Jesus' words in Matthew 5, verse 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Who does the kingdom belong to?

Those who realize that they can't do anything to enter it. Those who realize in their spirit, their mournful, depraved, unwilling and hopeless spirit that they are in desperate need of God's intervention in their life.

It is to those people that the kingdom belongs. Jesus will say it in chapter 2 of Mark. You'll see it in verse 17. We'll get there in a couple of weeks.

[22 : 03] He said, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. And he said, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Jesus wasn't saying that not everybody was a sinner.

He was acknowledging that not everybody views themselves as a sinner, and therefore they will not receive the gift of salvation. So we see his desperate cry.

Thirdly, we see his miraculous cleansing. His miraculous cleansing. Leprosy. Leprosy. Leprosy. Leprosy is always representative of man's sin.

The Bible never speaks of it as a disease from which a person is healed, but as a condition from which a person is cleansed. Notice with me in verse 40.

He said, if you will, you can make me clean. When Jesus responds, he says, be thou clean. When he deals with the instruction to go to the temple and to present himself, it is for the purpose of cleansing.

[23 : 09] Not healing, not healing, cleansing. The categories of clean and unclean are important in the scriptures. They mostly refer to moral purity, not personal hygiene.

And the solution for being unclean was not to take a bath. It was to make a sacrifice. The issue wasn't dirt. The issue was guilt.

And leprosy placed a person in the unclean category. And the leper was totally cut off. Totally cut off from the covenant worship community of God's people.

When the man asked Jesus to make him clean, I truly believe that he was seeking not only physical healing, he was seeking spiritual cleansing. He would have viewed his leprosy as a curse from God.

He would immediately responded to that sickness as a result of his own sin. He's seeking cleansing. And he went to the right source because only Jesus could provide both of those things.

[24 : 13] And so Mark, once again, turns our attention from the grotesque picture of the leper. And he turns our hearts and our focus and our eyes to the wonderful, amazing, powerful Savior.

So let's look at the repetition that is beginning to form here about Jesus. First, we see his compassionate heart. Christ's compassionate heart. Look at verse 41. And Jesus moved with compassion.

Mark tells us that Jesus' heart was filled with compassion toward the man.

If you've ever done a study of the word, you know what it means. It literally means a moving of the bowels. In other words, Jesus actually felt agony, even anger, as some people would refer to his reaction here, even anger over the man's condition.

That emotion wasn't directed at the man. It was directed for the man. He felt such agony over what sins cursed had done to this man that Jesus did the unthinkable.

[25 : 29] He touched him. He reached forth his hand and touched the man. The law didn't even allow a person to come within a few feet of a leper.

On windy days, 150 feet is how far the leper had to stay away. And anyone who would have come within that distance was considered at that point unclean and had to go through a series of rituals to make them ceremonial clean again.

Jesus couldn't be defiled. His compassionate heart was demonstrated in that not only did he stand close to this man, but he touched him.

Not only did Jesus do for the leper what no one else could do, but he felt for the leper what no one else could feel. Dane Ortlund writes about this.

He said, What did Jesus do when he saw the unclean? What was his first impulse when he came across prostitutes and lepers? He moved toward them.

[26 : 39] Pity flooded his heart. The longing of true compassion. He spent time with them. He touched them. And he goes on to say, We can all testify of the humanness of touch.

A warm hug does something warm words of greeting cannot do. But there is something deeper in Christ's touch of compassion. He was reversing the Jewish system.

When Jesus, the clean one, touched an unclean sinner, Christ did not become unclean. The sinner became clean. It's amazing.

And it was with the same compassion that Jesus looks at you. And it is with the same love that he feels for you.

His compassionate heart is clear. And then we see his divine power. His divine power. Look at verse 42. And as soon as Jesus had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed.

[27 : 54] Jesus not only had compassion, but he has the power to affect true and lasting change in your life.

Immediately the man was restored to complete and total health. Jesus' healings are always complete. No person would be able to look at this man now and have any idea that it was just moments before a leper.

Maybe a leper for a long time. There's no telling what his condition was like. Nobody would be able to look at him and tell his healing was complete. There was no rehabilitation that had to take place.

Jesus didn't set him on the road to recovery from leprosy. He healed him completely. In the moment, every putrefying sore disappeared.

Any limbs that he had lost, and probably there were several fingers maybe that he had lost because of this illness and this sickness, were immediately restored to him.

[29 : 00] He could see them. He could feel them. His nerves no longer numb. Complete healing. The atrophy of his muscular system, after having nothing to do but sit and think outside the city, all of a sudden was completely reversed.

All of this happened to the fullest extent in a moment because Jesus touched him and said, Be clean, and then this divine power overwhelms this man, and Jesus does something for him that he and no one else could ever do, and it was a complete and final healing.

The power of Christ in salvation is just as complete, and it's just as immediate. Every single sin is forgiven.

Eternal life is freely provided, and it is all a present possession for anyone that will recognize their hopeless condition and desperately cry out to Jesus for salvation.

He has not only the power, but the will to give you life and to save you, not one day, but today.

[30 : 27] Today. It's amazing. Did you notice Jesus' words? He didn't just say, Be clean.

He responded to the man's question. If you will, you can. And what's the first thing Jesus says?

I will. I want to. I want to do this healing. I want to give you salvation. I want to forgive your sin.

I want to cleanse you today. We're immediately reminded of Romans chapter 10. Everyone that will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Not one day. Today. And that salvation is immediate, and it's complete. Every sin.

[31 : 33] Doesn't matter how wretched it was or how wretched it will be. Your forgiveness is full. But it only comes to those who will call.

And the only people that ever call on his name are the desperate. And they're desperate because they know the hopelessness of their condition.

We're going to stop there today, but I want to ask you, and I don't often do this. I want to ask you, have you ever recognized your hopeless condition? Truly?

Truly? Have you ever made this desperate cry? Knowing that doing your best and trying your hardest will never work.

Knowing that you might could improve your life, but you could never do anything that would forgive your sin. you could never do anything that would give you eternal life.

[32 : 41] Have you ever made this cry? I mean it. Jesus can do for you what no one else can do, and he feels for you what no one else can feel.

And his promise is, if you will but cry to him, he will. And it will be full, and it will be immediate.

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