

Jesus Cleanses a Leper

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Date: 15 February 2014

Preacher: Rev Alex MacDonald

[0 : 00] Could you turn with me now to that passage that we read in Mark's Gospel, Mark chapter 1, and particularly some words in verse 41.

Mark chapter 1, verse 41. Moved with pity or compassion, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean.

Here was a man who was untouchable, and it was the touch of Jesus' hand that changed his life. In India, there's a group of people known as the Dalits, who traditionally were the lowest caste, untouchable, outcast.

How about you this evening? Is there perhaps something in your own life that makes you feel some identity with this man here?

[1 : 10] That whole idea of being outcast, of being untouchable. Sometimes we can feel marginalized or excluded. Sometimes we feel we don't really belong.

Maybe we need the touch of Jesus' hand. Or perhaps there's some area in your life that is untouchable. Something that you're ashamed of.

Or makes it difficult for you to feel that you belong. You need the touch of Jesus' hand. Perhaps you feel none of that. Perhaps everything's fine, everything's going well in your life.

You feel you belong. You've got a certain social status. But how's your relationship with God? It's very easy for us to keep up on appearance.

But how is our real relationship with God? When other people talk about that, when the conversation turns to spiritual things, perhaps you feel that you feel that you're on the outside, you're excluded, not because of anything they've said, but just a feeling in yourself.

[2 : 23] You need the touch of Jesus' hand to restore that relationship with the Lord, perhaps if you had one before. Or to give you that relationship if you've never had it.

Because you see, the Bible is not a medical textbook. Not as a sociological or psychological textbook.

It's primary concern is not with our physical or our mental or our social health, although all these things will be affected.

But its primary concern is with our spiritual health. The healing miracles of Jesus are set against a background of a particular perspective on suffering in the Bible.

And it concerns the link between sin and suffering. And it's a very complex thing. So often people try to simplify it and to try to say, oh well, the Bible says that if you're suffering, it must be because of sin.

[3 : 31] It's as if they interpret it that it's like the Eastern idea that somebody's suffering because of a sin they've committed in their past life or something like that. That there's a direct connection between a person's suffering and their own personal sin.

That is not what the Bible teaches. But it does teach that through the fall of the human race, through human rebellion against God, this also brought suffering into the world.

There is no necessary link between an individual's sin and disease. For instance, in John chapter 9, Jesus makes that abundantly plain. Because the disciples brought to Jesus' attention this man who was born blind.

And they were puzzled. They were saying, was it this man who sinned? Or was it his parents that he was born blind? Because they had this contemporary understanding that there was this connection, this direct connection, between either a person's sin and their own suffering, or their parents' sin and that person's suffering.

But Jesus said, it's not that this man sinned or his parents, but it's that the glory of God may be displayed, and he healed the man.

[4 : 45] However, this link between the physical and the spiritual is perhaps seen most clearly in Isaiah chapter 53, which is a prophecy concerning Jesus.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions. It seems to be mixing up things that we tend to hold apart. Infirmities and sorrows, diseases, griefs, and transgressions and sins.

But in Matthew chapter 8, verses 16 to 17, we read that Jesus healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah, he took up our infirmities and carried our diseases. So we can see that what Jesus did in dealing with physical disease or with mental disease was illustrative of his great work that he had come to do concerning our sin.

[5 : 49] Also, there's the whole idea of cleansing. In verse 40 and verse 41, this idea of being made clean is used.

The man who had leprosy, he came to Jesus asking that he be made clean. The whole idea of being purified from this disease, and exactly the same language, is used of being purified from sin. Last night, we were thinking about the verse in 1 John chapter 1, verse 9, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

We see this focus on the importance of our relationship with God in the very next chapter. In Mark chapter 2, verses 1 to 12, the healing of the paralyzed man.

And we see there that Jesus' primary concern is that this man's relationship with God is restored. People were astonished that his first words to the man were, your sins are forgiven.

[7 : 00] His friends, no doubt, were expecting that Jesus would immediately heal the man. Others, of course, were critical of Jesus saying any such thing as, your sins are forgiven, because quite clearly, to them, and they rightly understood it, he was claiming divine powers by doing so.

But the point is, for our subject tonight, is that Jesus saw that the heart of this man's problem was not his physical problem.

It wasn't his physical paralysis, but his spiritual. And his healing of the physical paralysis was illustrative of what he could do for the man spiritually in healing his spiritual paralysis.

Therefore, the miraculous physical healing is a kind of parable of the necessary spiritual healing that we all need, whether we are hale and hearty or whether we are suffering physically or not. We all suffer from the disease of sin, and from that we need to be cured. So we have here, in this passage, described, first of all, a man in a desperate condition.

[8 : 16] He was suffering from leprosy, we're told. Now, we don't know the exact nature of this disease, because in the ancient world, there wasn't the exact medical knowledge to distinguish between various kinds of skin diseases.

It may have been what we nowadays call leprosy, that is Hansen's disease. Evidence for leprosy dates back to ancient Egypt in about 4000 BC.

And it was discussed by the Greek doctor Hippocrates in 460 BC. That's the man from whom we get the Hippocratic Oath. And interestingly, the earliest proven human case was verified by DNA taken from the shrouded remains of a man discovered in a tomb next to the old city of Jerusalem. And it was dated by radiocarbon methods to the period 1 to 50 AD. In other words, the man who died of leprosy was an exact contemporary of Jesus.

So it's quite obvious that there were people suffering from what we call modern-day leprosy at that time when Jesus was healing.

[9 : 33] But the point is, whatever the exact nature of the disease, it excluded a man from human society and from the worship of God. The regulations in connection with it were laid down in Leviticus chapter 13.

Such a person was excluded from the community and also excluded from the temple, the worship of God. Now, no doubt, part of this was quite simply a modern medical fact of, to prevent the spread of infection, someone being isolated.

But, of course, it is also illustrative of the contamination of sin and that because of our sin we are excluded from the fellowship of God and the presence of God.

So here we have a man who was suffering, he was excluded, he was isolated, and so he is the perfect picture of the fallen sinful human condition.

It seemed a hopeless situation as indeed our sinful condition seems so often to be hopeless. Dylan called it the disease of conceit.

[10:46] There's a whole lot of hearts breaking tonight from the disease of conceit. Whole lot of hearts shaking tonight from the disease of conceit. Steps into your room, eats into your soul.

Over your senses you have no control. Ain't nothing you can do. Ain't nothing too discreet about the disease of conceit. This disease of sin that infects us is far more radical and far more destructive than any physical disease.

What can we do about it? Well, what did this man do concerning his physical disease, his physical illness? He came to Jesus. This man in a desperate condition, he came to Jesus.

And notice some interesting things about it. He came to Jesus just as he was. There was nothing that he could do to make himself more acceptable.

He couldn't in any way tidy himself up, clean himself up, cure himself in any way so that he could be more acceptable to Jesus. He simply had to come as he was.

[12:01] He was suffering from this disease. He was unclean. He was excluded. But yet he came simply as he was to Jesus. Horatius Bonner wrote a hymn, I came to Jesus as I was, so weary, worn, and sad.

I found in him a resting place and he has made me glad. I came to Jesus as I was. And here's an area where there's so much misunderstanding.

People think somehow that if they're going to benefit from what is offered in the Christian faith, they somehow have got to improve themselves first.

They somehow have got to clean up their act first before they come to Jesus. That somehow they've got to contribute something to this thing, salvation. But the biblical message is there is nothing that you can contribute.

You are like this man, a leper, an outcast, untouchable. And yet he came to Jesus as he was.

[13:11] You simply to come to Jesus in all your need, in all your, the filthiness of your sin, whatever it may be, you come to him because only he can clean you up.

And Jesus is inviting you to come. He says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden. He invites people constantly to come to himself.

Come as you are. Come wherever your needs are. Come to him and commit it all to him and he will sort it out. That is the message of the gospel. Notice also, this man came humbly.

We're told that he came on his knees. He came kneeling before Jesus. But it wasn't just his outward attitude that was so humble. His words also were humble. He said, if you are willing.

Some people today act as if God owes them. That God owes them something because of their suffering, because of their trouble or whatever, that God somehow owes them.

[14:21] This man didn't come with that attitude at all. He said, if you are willing. He recognized that he had to cast himself wholly on the sovereign grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He recognized that God owes us nothing. In fact, we owe God. We owe God obedience. We owe God cleanliness of our hearts. And we haven't got these things.

And yet, we can come asking God humbly to help us if you are willing. Notice too his faith because he said, if you are willing, if you will, you can make me clean.

Now, it's so often true that today people turn around what this man said and put it the opposite way. They might say, well, if you can cure me, you must make me clean.

They're putting the doubt in the wrong place. They're putting the doubt in the ability of God, the ability of Jesus to do the thing.

[15:29] the leper had faith in Jesus' power to heal. He knew that he could make him clean. He knew that because he had seen Jesus do that to others or he'd heard of Jesus doing that to others.

He knew the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. And tonight, we can be absolutely sure of that power.

We know that Jesus is able to do that not only because of these testimonies in Scripture, but because of the testimonies perhaps of people that we know, of lives transformed, lives changed.

The only question, as this man had, was, if you are willing. In other words, he cast himself wholly on the sovereign grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so he came in the right attitude and in the right spirit. So no matter what your situation or condition tonight, you can come to Jesus.

You're invited to come to him. All you have to do is to trust in him that he can do everything necessary to heal your broken relationship with God.

[16:41] That's how this man came concerning his physical disease, his physical struggle. And that's exactly the same that we've got to do as we come to Jesus with our spiritual disease of sin.

I want to think with you next about the response of Jesus Christ here. And his response is compassionate. There is actually no equivalent word in the English language for the word that is used here that's translated pity in this version and it's translated compassion in other versions. The nearest expression perhaps would be an approximation something like a gut-wrenching compassion because it's based on this idea, I think a very physical idea that you know sometimes when you see someone that's hurt, it's as if your innards kind of contract with sympathy. You feel that same injury or that same pain yourself. It's something of that idea. It means being deeply moved with tender sympathy. And it's interesting that the verb that is used here is used in the Gospels only of Jesus except in three parables that Jesus himself told. The parable of the unmerciful servant, the one who was shown compassion by his master but didn't show it to someone else. It's used by Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son that the father had compassion on his son.

[18:20] And it's used in the story of the good Samaritan. The Samaritan, the despised outsider, showed the compassion that the priest and the Levite did not.

And these three stories are of course illustrative of that kind of compassion that Jesus showed. Because it is in Jesus that we see this amazing compassion.

He was moved with compassion by the spiritual lostness of the people around him. We're told that when he looked at the crowds he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

He was moved by the suffering and sorrow of others. But the really revolutionary thing about this in New Testament times was this.

that in Greek thought at that time God was unmoved by the human condition. There was a Greek word for it apathia.

[19:20] The word from which we get apathy. But it didn't really mean apathy so much. That wasn't the original meaning of it or indifference. It really meant being incapable of feeling.

God or the gods were incapable of feeling or incapable of suffering, incapable of compassion. That was the world into which the gospel came and took that world by storm speaking of a God who was full of compassion.

A God who felt for people in all their struggle, in all their weakness, in all their sin, and all their suffering. Because here we have the Son of God, God in the flesh, being moved to the depths of his being by the suffering of an untouchable.

And you see, the great tragedy is that that idea of apathia, the Greek idea, came into Christian theology. The whole idea that God is unmoved, that God cannot suffer, that God is so remote from us, that he is not involved with us, and he doesn't feel for us.

But the whole Christian gospel is that he is, because all that Jesus did, he did not just as a man, he did as the person, the divine, human person, Jesus, the eternal Son of God.

[20:54] So in Jesus we see the compassion of God, we see the sympathy of God. We see God coming alongside us in our suffering, and we see his feeling for us, being moved to the depth of his being, even by someone who is an outcast and untouchable like this man.

So whatever your condition today is, whatever your circumstance, whatever your situation, it may be that others have given up on you because of your situation, maybe that you have given up on yourself, but know this, Jesus has compassion on you, and he's saying to you, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

But then there's a very significant thing here. Jesus reached out. He reached out, we're told, and he touched the man, but he reached out.

So Jesus doesn't just feel love. love. Jesus doesn't just feel compassion, he shows love, he acts in love, he reaches out. His whole incarnate ministry was a reaching out.

He came from the glories of heaven to the miseries and suffering of earth. He came where people were hurting and lost and dying, and reached out to them.

[22:21] He reaches out to this poor excluded outcast leper. forever. And tonight, he's reaching out to you. Whatever your circumstances, whatever your spiritual standing, you know that you need the outreach of the Lord Jesus Christ to you in his compassion and his love.

And that is what he's coming to us with here tonight. And there's a great message for us as a church in all of this. Because you see, sometimes we use the word outreach, don't we, as to what the church ought to be doing in the world.

And it's a very good word. because that's what God has done to us. He's reached out to us to touch us in our sin and in our suffering and to save us.

And we're called to live lives that are imitative of the Lord Jesus Christ's great outreaching love and to show that same love to others, to reach out to those who perhaps others may feel are untouchable or outcast.

death. But then there's something that is amazingly significant here, and that is that Jesus touched the man with his hand. Now that may seem a very ordinary thing to us.

[23 : 37] People today have become much more touchy-feely than they used to be. But you see, this was amazingly significant. It was shocking, in fact. because the leper was untouchable.

People would have run a mile from him. But not only does Jesus not run from him, he reaches out his hand and he touches him. Now, there was in one sense no need for Jesus to touch the man to heal him of his leprosy.

He healed other people with just a word. He healed people miles away with just a word. But here he chose deliberately to touch this man.

And by touching the man, not only did Jesus communicate his love and compassion to him, but by touching the leper, Jesus himself became contaminated.

He became ceremonially unclean. If the religious authorities knew about it, they would exclude him from the synagogue. They would exclude him from the temple. He was unclean because he had touched the man who was unclean.

[24 : 51] But Jesus deliberately touched him, not only to communicate his love and compassion to the man, which it did, of course, but it was a parable of his life's work.

He brought healing to others by taking the contamination to himself. He brought healing to others by taking the suffering of our sins to himself.

He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases. Or as Peter says in 1 Peter 2, verse 24, he bore our sins in his body on the tree.

Do you know tonight this touch of Jesus' hand, this touch of love and compassion, a touch of transformation and cleansing?

Do you know that? If you know that in your own experience, that is the most amazing thing to know, this communication of divine love and compassion. There's an old poem called The Old Violin, and it goes like this.

[25 : 56] It was battered and scarred, and the auctioneer thought it's scarcely worth his while to waste much time on the old violin, and he held it up with a smile. What am I bidding, good folks, he cried.

Who'll start the bidding for me? A dollar? A dollar? Who'll make it two? Two dollars? Who'll make it three? Three dollars once? Three dollars twice?

And going? And gone? But no. From the room far back came a grey-haired man, and he picked it up with the bow, and wiping the dust from the old violin and tightening up all the strings, he played a melody pure and sweet, as sweet as an angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer, in a voice that was quiet and low, said, What am I bid for the old violin? And he held it up with the bow.

A thousand dollars? Who'll make it two? Two thousand? Who'll make it three? Three thousand once? Three thousand twice? And going and gone, said he.

[27 : 04] And the people cheered. But some of us said, We don't quite understand what changed its worth. Swift came the reply. It was the touch of the master's hand.

And there's many a man with his life out of tune, that's battered and torn with sin, is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd, much like the old violin.

A mess of pottage, a glass of wine, a game, and he travels on. He's going once, he's going twice, he's going and almost gone. But the master comes.

And the foolish crowd can never quite understand the worth of a soul or the change that is wrought by the touch of the master's hand.

You too, tonight, can know the transforming touch of the master's hand. I don't know if you feel that your life is out of tune, or if you feel battered and torn with sin.

[28 : 06] But in fact, that's Jesus' verdict of us. Whoever commits sin is a slave to sin. By nature, we're estranged from God because of our rebellious hearts. We need the touch of Jesus' hand.

In his love, taking all the burden of our sin, and the burden of our suffering for sin, and the exclusion caused by sin, taking all of that on himself.

Because that's what he did as he died on the cross. And we hope tomorrow, if we're spared, to think about that great sacrifice the Lord Jesus Christ made in dying for us.

That's why we commemorate it. That's why we remember it. That's why we are enthralled by it.

Because the Lord Jesus Christ took on himself what our sin deserves.

And he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He became the one who was untouchable. Because he bore our sin.

[29 : 09] He became sin. And all we have to do is to ask Jesus to touch us. To ask Jesus to make us clean.

To come as we are in all our untouchableness and experience the touch of Jesus' hand. maybe we need that touch again.

Maybe we've had it before. But maybe our life has got out of tune in some way. And we need the Master to touch us. And to transform us. And to tune us up.

So that we can sing a glorious melody to the glory of the Lord who has saved us and had compassion on us. Let's pray.