

The Touch of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. The past several weeks we've been going through the Gospel of Mark, and today we've come to a short account of Jesus healing a man with a terrible disease called leprosy.

It can be found in Mark chapter 1, verses 40 through 45, on page 786 of your Pew Bible. In the sermon this morning, we're going to go through this account verse by verse, examining the leper's life, his background, his condition, and as much of his circumstances as we can figure out. All these things will help us to see how Jesus lovingly ministers to this man with leprosy. And then through Jesus' great love, we will also see how God ministers to us and how he wants us to minister to others.

So let's turn to our passage. We're in Mark chapter 1, verse 40. Mark has just told us that Jesus has been preaching in the synagogues of Galilee, announcing the Gospel, the good news of the Kingdom of God, and calling people to repent.

And then verse 40 reads like this. And a leper came to him, imploring him and kneeling, said to him, if you will, you can make me clean.

[1 : 1 9] Our account begins with Jesus somewhere in Galilee, and a leper, a man with a disease called leprosy, he comes to Jesus and he implores him. And he kneels down and he says, if you will, you can make me clean.

Now, though we have only been barely introduced to this man, we can actually figure out a lot about this man's life and background. And if we spend a little time getting to know this man and his circumstances, we will better understand the amazing thing that Jesus will do next.

So let's start with the basics. Mark has told us that this man was a leper. This means he had the deadly skin disease called leprosy.

Leprosy, as many of you know, causes sores and bumps all over a leper's body. And these can progress step by step, sometimes for many years. Lepers often slowly lose feeling in their arms and legs.

They experience muscle weakness. Leprosy can lead to great disfigurement, especially of the face. It can cause blindness, loss of hands and feet. And eventually, it can cause death.

[2 : 2 9] And in the ancient world, lepers were everywhere. This is why leprosy is mentioned throughout the Bible. And not only was leprosy present in the ancient world, until recently it was present throughout much of the modern world.

In fact, it still exists here and there. But perhaps what made leprosy even worse was that it was contagious. You could catch it from someone else who had leprosy.

In our day, we can treat leprosy, but in the ancient world, it was untreatable. And the fact that leprosy was contagious meant that the best way to avoid getting leprosy was to avoid contact with lepers.

And so in the ancient world, this combination of carrying a deadly disease and carrying a deadly disease that was contagious and carrying a deadly, contagious disease that could horribly disfigure a person, all this meant that lepers were outcasts and exiles.

People did not want to be around them because they were so difficult to look at and because people worried about contracting a fatal disease. So if we put all this together, we can understand a little bit about this man who has come to Jesus, and we can imagine how he's been suffering physically, and we can guess how he's been treated by others.

[3 : 4 1] Now, this is all the Gospel of Mark tells us about this man, but we can learn a little more about him by looking at the Gospel of Luke. Luke, chapter 5, verse 12, records the same account of Jesus and this man with leprosy, but Luke adds a detail.

He says that the man did not just have leprosy, but that he was, quote, full of leprosy. This means that the man was covered with leprosy.

It means that he had probably been suffering from leprosy for a long time. He probably had it for many years. It means that he was perhaps greatly disfigured in his hands and face.

It means he may have been near death. And this man comes to Jesus, and he kneels before him, and he implores him for mercy. What will our Lord Jesus do?

Will he heal this poor man who has suffered so much? Will he heal this man who is imploring him for mercy? This is a famous story, and some of you know what Jesus is going to do.

[4 : 46] But before we go on to the next verse, I just want to pause, because I think that we can tell even more about this man, and thereby appreciate Jesus even more, too.

One of the wonderful things about the Bible is that one passage in Scripture often has much to do with another passage in Scripture. And it turns out that much of how Jesus will interact with this man in the Gospel of Mark is informed by the rules and regulations concerning leprosy that are given in the book of Leviticus.

And so, to fully understand what Jesus is about to do for this man, we need to fully understand the account in Leviticus, which tells of how to treat someone with leprosy. This passage in the book of Leviticus is part of the Mosaic Law.

This is the law that was given by God to Moses more than 1,000 years before Jesus. And it describes what to do with someone who's suspected of having leprosy. This account can be found in Leviticus chapter 13, and I believe on page 84 of your pew Bibles.

And though this is a long passage, we're only going to read a handful of verses. And while we're turning to Leviticus, let's join together in prayer. And ask God to guide us as we read his word and seek to understand.

[5 : 59] Join with me. We thank you, Father, maker of heaven and earth, that though you spun the stars into existence, you saw fit to give us your word in a book that we may hold in our hands, from which we can learn so much of you.

This morning we are reading about how your son Jesus interacted with a man suffering from leprosy. And we ask that you would illuminate us through your word.

Guide us as we read. Give us understanding about what Moses wrote of leprosy and about how your son Jesus ministered to a man with leprosy and about what this means for us and for our church.

In all of this, Lord, convict us where we fall short. Restore us where we have repented. Help us to know your care and love for us and help us to have that same care and love for others.

Amen. All right, let's turn to Leviticus chapter 13. As I said, we're reading this passage because it will tell us much about how Jesus interacted with this man who had leprosy.

[7 : 01] And this passage in Leviticus is part of the laws that were given to Moses by God more than a thousand years before Jesus. And this is one of those passages that at first might seem like a long list of irrelevant rules.

But don't be intimidated by chapters like these in your Bible. God inspired every word and every letter of Scripture and he put every passage in the Bible for a reason.

And with this passage, though it might appear at first like a long list of hard-to-understand rules, there's something wonderful going on in it, something which lies hidden at first.

And not only that, there are things in there that will help us to appreciate even more what Jesus is about to do with the man who has leprosy. So here we go. Chapter 13, verse 1.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a case of leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priest, and the priest shall examine the diseased area on the skin of his body.

[8 : 09] And if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a case of leprous disease. When the priest has examined him, he shall pronounce him unclean.

But if the spot is white on the skin of his body and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days, and the priest shall examine him on the seventh day.

And if in his eyes the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up for another seven days, and the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day.

And if the diseased area has faded and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean. It is only an eruption, and he shall wash his clothes and be clean.

But if the eruption spreads in the skin after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest, and the priest shall look.

[9 : 12] And if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a leprous disease. So let's sum up this passage.

In the nation of Israel, if someone was suspected of having leprosy, they were to be examined by a priest. And God gave the priest several symptoms to look for, and depending on the symptoms, the suspected leper could be categorized as clean, which means they didn't have leprosy, or unclean, which means they might have leprosy.

There was also a third intermediate stage of quarantine for a seven-day cycle. And after being quarantined for seven days, someone who might have leprosy would then be checked by the priest again and declared clean or unclean, or they could be sent off to quarantine for another seven days, and the process would repeat itself until the person was declared clean or unclean.

And if someone ever was declared clean and the skin ailments spread, then they had to go back to the priest for the process to begin anew. Now, this passage goes on for some time, giving further specifications about all sorts of skin ailments, instructions on examining the kinds of sores present on people, the proper disposal of certain contaminated garments, and how to wash contaminated garments.

It should be known, too, that some of the Hebrew vocabulary items mentioned in the passage are difficult to translate, and they probably indicate a broader or a different categorization of disease and symptoms than we typically have today.

[10 : 41] But the end result for someone with a skin disease was this. Eventually, the person would either be declared clean or unclean. And Leviticus goes on to say if they were declared unclean, they were forbidden from entering the camp of the people of Israel.

They were forbidden from living amongst villages and towns and cities, and they were forbidden from living with other healthy people. In fact, they had to visibly indicate that they had been declared unclean by tearing their clothes and letting their hair hang loose and by covering their mouth and by loudly proclaiming that they were unclean so that people would know to avoid them.

The same chapter of Leviticus, chapter 13, verse 45, concludes with this. The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, Unclean, unclean!

He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp. Thus, the person with leprosy was to be totally separated from all other people.

They could not interact with anyone, and they were supposed to cry unclean to warn other people not to come near them. So serious were these regulations that several books later in the Bible, in Deuteronomy, chapter 24, verse 8, The Israelites are again instructed to carefully observe all the ordinances that God taught them about leprosy.

[12 : 11] Deuteronomy reads, Take care in a case of leprous disease to be very careful to do according to all that the Levitical priests shall direct you, as I commanded them, so you shall be careful to do.

Friends, it scarcely needs to be said that this process of quarantining those who have a contagious disease is all too familiar to us who've lived through the coronavirus pandemic.

And it goes without saying that being quarantined is difficult and hard. And if the quarantine lasts for some time, it can be an awful, isolating experience.

We know also that covering our faces when we interact with others can be very difficult, too. But now imagine how difficult the quarantine would be if you had leprosy in the ancient world, and your quarantine lasted for years and years, and every month you grew slowly worse and worse, and every month you grew more lonely with no one to help you, and every day you knew that your death was coming.

These laws about leprosy that God gave through Moses were a drastic measure, but in a society which could not treat leprosy, the only other option was to let many more people suffer.

[13 : 31] And so God, in his good judgment and in his compassion, instructed the Israelites to enforce a strict quarantine for leprosy, which would mean that a small number of people would suffer instead of a great number.

But there's also something else going on in this passage. It turns out that this quarantine for leprosy, which God stipulated, is actually the first example of a medical quarantine in human history.

It would be hundreds, if not thousands of years before science progressed enough to understand how diseases spread. So these laws about leprosy, though they were very strict, they also show God's compassion.

Compassion. They appear to demonstrate God mercifully and amazingly and miraculously, providing medical foreknowledge to the people of God. And there are actually many other examples like this in Moses' laws, laws that dictate sanitary procedures like the proper disposal of human waste, washing before eating, using soap, laws of sexual purity, all of which demonstrate remarkable medicinal foresight, and all of which demonstrate God's deep compassion for his people.

So even in this list of rules for leprosy that at first might seem so harsh, we actually see God's wonderful and even miraculous compassion for his people.

[14 : 59] But let's return to that man with leprosy who came to Jesus in Mark chapter 1. We've already seen how the man was full of leprosy, how he likely had the disease for many years, how he was probably greatly disfigured and how his death may not be far off.

But now with the help of Leviticus, we know some other things about the man. We know that several or perhaps many years previously, this man would have noticed that he had a skin disease and he would have been brought to a priest and examined for this skin condition.

And then likely after several weeks of quarantine, several weeks of worrying about his fate, he would have been deemed unclean and then he would have been cast out of his village and probably cast out of his family.

The Old Testament commandments were intended by God to be implemented with love, but we know that the Israelites often did the opposite. So this man, after being cast out of his village, he may have endured years of people scorning him, years of abandonment or ridicule, stereotyping, stigmatization.

I think you can be sure that when this man came to Jesus, he was lonely and in despair and with few friends and little family. And all this suffering we know would have probably ended in this man's death.

[16 : 17] And this man comes to Jesus and he kneels before Jesus and he implores Jesus. He says, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. And now Leviticus has taught us something else about this passage.

The laws of leprosy in Leviticus say that this man was not supposed to come near to Jesus. He was supposed to be isolated. He was supposed to run away. He was supposed to cover his mouth and tear his clothes and yell, unclean, unclean.

This man had a deadly contagious disease and in violation of the law, he comes near to Jesus and exposes Jesus. What will Jesus do? Will he rebuke him?

Instead, our Jesus does something amazing. We read in verses 41 and 42, Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and he touched him.

And he said to him, I will be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean.

[17 : 23] Notice carefully what Jesus does here. It's easy to miss. Jesus does, of course, miraculously cleanse the man. That's easy to see.

But before all that, Jesus does the last thing that many of us would want to do. He stretches out his hand and he touches the leper. Jesus' first instinct when seeing this man with leprosy is to touch him.

His first action is to touch this man who had a fatal and contagious disease that spread by contact and Jesus touches him. The only way to avoid getting leprosy is to avoid contact with lepers.

And Jesus touches this leper. According to the Levitical law, part of which we read, this made Jesus unclean.

But Jesus touches the man still. He put his hand on the leper. He put his hand on a man who may not have felt human touch for years.

[18 : 33] Jesus looks at this man and he knows him. He knows that his struggles are more than just a physical disease. He knows the man has been isolated for years and likely rejected by friends and family.

And Jesus sees his despair and he draws near to him. Jesus' first action is to attend to this man's inner spiritual state.

And Jesus risks his own life to do this. He could have simply said a word from afar to cure him like he does many other times, but he doesn't. Jesus touches the man so that he might touch the man's heart also.

And Jesus risks much to do this. Jesus himself now might be considered unclean by others. He himself risks becoming a leper. He himself might face scorn.

He himself might face isolation and rejection and disease and death. But Jesus saw the suffering of this man and shared his suffering.

[19 : 42] And he reached out and touched this man's heart. And this is all aside from the fact that he miraculously cleansed him from leprosy. Friends, I wonder, have you ever felt the touch of Jesus?

We may not have leprosy, but we all are like this man. We all are unclean before Jesus. We all are like lepers in his sight.

But he draws near to us still. Jesus proclaimed, those who are healthy have no need of a doctor. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Friends, are you caught in the uncleanness of your sins? Are you enslaved by them with no way out? Are you unclean before God? Are you in despair or alone without friends or family?

Are you in darkness? If so, have you gone to Jesus like this leper? Have you fallen on your face and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean?

[20 : 50] I remember when 20 years ago Jesus reached out his hand and touched me when I was wandering in darkness and despair. When all of a sudden the light of the world, Jesus, came near and he reached out and took hold of me and he cleansed me of my sins and he poured the love of God into my heart.

Friends, if you have not yet gone to Jesus, if you have not yet asked him with a humble heart to make you clean, then I invite you to do so today and he will cleanse you like he cleansed this man.

And church, if you've already been cleansed by Jesus, are you now turning to cleanse and love others like Jesus has done for you? Are you like Jesus, drawing near to those who are unclean?

Are you reaching out to them? In our society today, we do not have many lepers, but we have many people who are unclean in our sight.

Sometimes it is those who look different or act different. Sometimes it is family or friends who annoy or hurt us. It could be colleagues or lab mates or roommates who make our life more challenging.

[22 : 03] It might be those who have a different political preference. It might be your difficult neighbor, your unreasonable boss, your subordinates at work, your extended family, or anyone else from the homeless man on the street to the politician in his mansion.

Whoever is unclean in your sight, are you loving them like Jesus does? Do you draw near to them? Do you reach out your hand to them?

Do you reach out to touch their heart? So, friends, gathering all these things together, we see that with just a word and just a touch, our Lord Jesus not only touched this leper physically, he also touched his heart.

And by this, he gives us an example that we are to follow. But Jesus isn't done yet ministering to this man. Let's continue reading.

Mark goes on to say in verse 43 and 44, And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once. He said to him, See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded for a proof to them.

[23 : 16] We've seen this before with Jesus. He doesn't want people bragging about the miraculous physical healing. Jesus isn't the carnival come to town. He's not a traveling road show.

He doesn't want gawkers gathering. The point of his ministry is not physical healing, though that happens in abundance. Jesus is about the deeper issues of the heart.

He is about the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation of men and women to God. So he tells the man not to go around telling everyone what happened. Instead, he instructs him to go to the priest and offer for his cleansing what Moses commanded.

And Jesus does this for two reasons. First, he draws the man's attention to the word of God and he exhorts him to follow it.

The Mosaic law had not yet been fulfilled by Jesus, and so Jesus calls the man to remember the very chapter we read in Leviticus and to do what was commanded by Moses, that if someone was cleansed of his skin disease, then they were to offer a sacrifice at the temple for their cleansing. [24 : 21] In doing this, Jesus reminds the man of what Moses wrote. He turns the man's attention to the word of God. Jesus shows the man how to properly interpret and apply the word of God to his life.

But there's a second reason that Jesus instructs the man to go to the priest. Jesus had already attended to this man's physical needs by healing him. He had already attended to this man's deeper emotional despair by drawing near and stretching out his hand and touching him.

He's already given him spiritual guidance by exhorting him to obey the scriptures. And now, by telling the man to go and see a priest, he is looking out for this man's restoration and reintegration with the people of God.

Jesus knows that this man has been cut off from the people of God for years. He knows that even after this miraculous encounter with Jesus, people will still think of the man as unclean unless a priest has declared him able to reenter Jewish society as the chapter we read in Leviticus instructs. So Jesus tells him to follow the Mosaic Law so that he might be restored to his family, to his friends, and to his hometown. Jesus is the good doctor.

[25 : 43] He is the great physician. He is the healer of our souls. He cares not just for the body, but for our soul, our mind, our spirit, and even for our spiritual community.

And with Jesus, he models for us how we are called to love others. Notice that for Jesus, exhorting someone to submit to the word of God on the one hand, and then attending to that person's physical and emotional needs on the other, are both required when it comes to loving your neighbor.

Sometimes we Christians choose one or the other. Sometimes we think that loving our neighbor means only speaking hard truths from Scripture. And sometimes we think that loving our neighbor only means attending to our neighbor's perceived physical and emotional needs.

But Jesus, the great physician, he shows that to love our neighbor means to do all those things together. It means to exhort others to attend to God's word, to exhort others to submit themselves to it, and to repent of their sins before God.

It also means to serve others, to attend to their physical needs, to touch their hearts, to help integrate them into a spiritual community, and to do all these things, even at great personal cost.

[27 : 03] And Jesus does this all throughout the Gospel of Mark, beginning at the very commencement of Jesus' ministry, in Mark 1:15, where Jesus' central message is that all people should repent of their sins.

And then, while Jesus is preaching this message, we see all throughout the Gospel of Mark account after account of Jesus' healings and acts of service and love continuing right up to where he goes to the cross for us.

Christians, I ask now what I asked before. Are you loving others like Jesus loves them? Are you loving others like Jesus loves you? Do you point others to the truth of God's word?

Do you serve others' physical needs? Do you care for others' emotions? Do you help the lonely to find a community? Do you ever risk or sacrifice for others like Jesus has done for you?

Jesus has left a model that we should follow. He says in the Gospel of John, for I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you.

[28 : 10] And Jesus did all these things when he ministered to this man with leprosy. I should say that loving others like Jesus does is hard to do and we need the grace of God to help us.

We cannot do it alone. So, if you are intimidated by these things, cast yourself on Jesus and he will help you. He will lift you up and as you go forth to preach the Gospel and to humbly love, there is something else you should know.

The final verse in our passage today shows that there is something else about loving others that makes it very challenging and of which Scripture wants you to be aware.

After Jesus tells the man not to speak openly about this miracle, we read in verse 45, but he went out and began to talk freely about it and to spread the news so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town but was out in desolate places and people were coming to him from every quarter.

After all Jesus did for this man, after all Jesus risked and after all the love with which he loved this man, then the man did not obey Jesus.

[29 : 33] And this resulted in Jesus not being able to preach the good news in the cities and towns like he once did. Friends, this is perhaps the hardest thing about loving others.

Sometimes they don't listen. In fact, Scripture promises that a lot of times they won't. But Christian, if you're discouraged in your walk and in your service with Christ, if you're tired of being rejected or misinterpreted, if you've not seen fruit for many years, then take heart.

What you have experienced, Jesus experienced, and your fellow saints experience. So keep your eyes on Jesus. Watch him in the Gospel of Mark.

Be encouraged by his perseverance. Don't be surprised when things don't turn out the way you hoped. After all, that's why we need a Savior. This is why we can't save ourselves and this is why we can't save others.

Be assured that the kingdom of God will not fail. It will continue to grow. Sometimes we don't know how, but God is faithful and he has promised in this very passage, after this man disobeys Jesus, meaning that Jesus could no longer preach openly in towns, people still come to Jesus from every quarter and he keeps right on preaching for the Gospel will not be restrained.

[31 : 03] So watch Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. In difficulty after difficulty, he continues to minister. He keeps right on serving. He even is betrayed by Judas, abandoned by his disciples.

He even goes to the cross and to his death, but then he goes to his resurrection and then to the heavens where he sits at the right hand of the throne of God. If you're discouraged, be faithful and cast yourself on Jesus and he will help you.

Share your burdens with your fellow Christians. Get involved in ministry here at Trinity. Link arms and fellowship with others and Christ will lift you up. And if you find yourself now like you are not much like this disobedient leper, if you've been cleansed by Jesus but have stumbled on the way, if you have fallen into sin, remember that Christ is still your Savior and we are still your brethren and turn to Jesus for life again.

And if you're sitting here this morning and you do not know Jesus, go to him today. Fall before him and say, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean and he will reach out to you and touch you just like he did for this leper.

Let's pray together. together. Oh, Lord, we just read of your miraculous compassion with that man with leprosy and, Lord, we confess that we are all unclean before you and we ask that you would reach out your hand and touch our hearts and cleanse us.

[32 : 43] Lord, not only physically but also cleanse our despair and our loneliness and all that darkness we may have and give us that light of life that only comes from you, the light of the world.

Lift up our faces to see you, God. Help us to submit ourselves to your word and to obey it and to put it into practice. Help us to repent where we fall and to forgive others and to help others carry their burdens, to love them like you love them.

And we pray this in your mighty name, Lord Jesus. Amen.