

Luke 5:12-16

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Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Turn with me in your Bibles to the Gospel of Luke. We are looking at Luke chapter 5.

If you're looking in one of the few Bibles, it is page 861. We're looking at the Gospel of Luke over the next couple of months in a series entitled Who is This?

This is one of the most common questions that the disciples and the crowds are asking about Jesus in this section of Luke, and we just want to focus our attention on Him. If you're exploring the Christian faith, Jesus is the one who's at the center of it all, and it stands or falls on Him.

If you're a follower of Jesus, the Bible calls us to fix our eyes on Him and not let anything else take that primary place. So let's read together.

We're reading Luke chapter 5, verses 12 to 16. Let's read these verses. While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.

[1 : 1 3] And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged Him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. And Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, I will be clean.

And immediately the leprosy left Him. And He charged Him to tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing as Moses commanded for a proof to them.

But now even more, the report about Him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear Him and to be healed of their infirmities. But He would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

This morning, I want to look at the leper's condition and the Savior's cleansing. The story begins with a man full of leprosy coming before Jesus.

Now, the word leprosy was used to refer to a variety of skin diseases, including itches, boils, burns, ringworm, and scalp conditions. So we can't be completely sure of the exact nature of the man's condition.

[2 : 2 3] But Luke tells us in verse 12 that he was full of leprosy. That is, his case had progressed to an advanced stage. It wasn't a minor ailment confined to one localized region in his body.

It wasn't just a slightly annoying rash that he could put clothes on that would cover it and go about his day mostly as usual. It had taken over his body and actually his life in a comprehensive way.

So it's very possible that he had the disease that we know of as leprosy. The medical term is Hansen's disease. This is a chronic infectious disease that attacks the nervous system.

Beginning with the peripheral regions such as fingers and toes, leprosy gradually makes your body numb, unable to feel anything. And it often causes the body to become disfigured as a result.

In Jesus' time, leprosy wasn't just an undesirable medical condition. It also had devastating social consequences. Leprosy could not touch anyone.

[3 : 28] They were not allowed to live with anyone except each other. They were not allowed into public places such as the synagogue or the temple. They could not work normal jobs. They were not allowed or they could not get married or actively raise children.

In Jesus' time, they were supposed to remain 50 paces away from other human beings. If someone wanted to help a leper, say by giving them food, they could leave the food somewhere, walk away, and the leper could go and get it.

Many people saw leprosy as a sign of God's curse on a particular individual. And so in all these ways, leprosy was a mark of shame and exclusion. Now some of these attitudes and practices had simply developed over time in that culture.

But some of them were rooted in the Old Testament law itself. If you look at Leviticus 13 and 14, it's an extensive discussion of how leprosy can be diagnosed.

And then what lepers have to do as a result. And then what should happen if someone recovered. And this is what it says lepers have to do.

[4 : 40] Leviticus 13, 45 and 46. It says, The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes, let the hair of his head hang loose, 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. Now you might ask, Why would the Old Testament law, given by God himself, require lepers to have such a miserable existence through no fault of their own?

Being separated from the broader society and making their appearance as off-putting as possible. Well, partly, it was a matter of public health.

By the time of Jesus, scribes had counted as many as 72 different afflictions that were defined as leprosy, sort of included under that term. Some of these were skin diseases that were highly contagious.

Some of them were incurable. Some of them had dreadful and even deadly effects. Rabbis spoke of lepers as the living dead. Right? Curing lepers was understood to be as difficult as raising the dead.

[5 : 56] But you know, the Old Testament laws weren't only about preserving public health, though that was a legitimate concern at the time. There was also a spiritual principle involved. You see, according to Leviticus, leprosy didn't just make you sick.

It made you unclean. And even here in this passage in Luke, notice, the leper needs not just healing, but cleansing. It's actually one of the major themes if you read the book of Leviticus.

What makes us unclean and how we can be cleansed? And according to Leviticus, it wasn't only direct personal violations of God's law, like idol worship or disobedience to the commandments that could make a person unclean.

There were several other things that could make you unclean, such as coming into contact with death and decay, touching a dead body or eating a scavenging animal, coming into contact with blood or other bodily discharges, or skin diseases like leprosy that caused disfigurement of the human body.

The common thread among all these things is that in some way or other, all of these things were visible signs or physical expressions of the brokenness and corruption in this world.

[7 : 13] In other words, the brokenness and corruption in this world somehow leaves its mark on us, and that's what makes us unclean. And in particular, leprosy, physically numbing and disfiguring was sometimes seen as a visual image of humanity's spiritual condition.

Earlier we read in Isaiah 64, Isaiah says, we have all become like one who is unclean. All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

In other words, our sin, that is our core rejection of God and rebellion against Him, it makes us unable to feel rightly. It distorts our perceptions.

It twists our very nature. Leprosy was one visible picture of just that. Now as Christians today, we are not bound by the Old Testament ceremonial law.

But there's actually an important insight into human nature contained within it. You see, there are many things today that can make us feel just like the leper would have felt back then.

[8 : 29] Dirty, disgusting, disfigured, dishonored, damaged goods, ugly, unwanted, worthless, rejected, shut out, and self-conscious about it.

In one word, what we're talking about here is shame. Shame is basically anything that makes you want to run and hide. Now sometimes we feel shame because of our past and present sins, especially ones that seem particularly scandalous or disgraceful.

maybe you were sexually unfaithful. Maybe you have a pornography habit. Maybe you have a crime that you were arrested for and now it's on your record.

Maybe you had an abortion. Maybe you pressured someone else to get an abortion. Maybe it's an addiction, drugs, or alcohol.

And it's ruined your life. Torn apart relationships. Maybe you've had a failure as a parent. Maybe it's something seemingly less catastrophic, but still it's made you want to run away and hide.

[9 : 53] One of the first times I remember feeling shame in my life, I think I was about five years old. And my aunt had taken me to pick raspberries with my cousins. And I sat in the back of the car and against her command, I ate a lot of the box of raspberries.

And we got back to her house and she said, did you eat the raspberries? And I said, no, I did not. And she said, look at your hands and face. You lied.

And then of course she had to tell my mother. Now that was a minor incident. It hasn't stayed with me throughout my life. But sometimes even seemingly non-catastrophic things, lies, where we get caught, make us feel shame.

But there's also other reasons, not just personal sins, there's also other reasons we might feel shame. Maybe you grew up in a house where you were constantly criticized and belittled or ignored and neglected.

Maybe you were adopted and however wonderful your adoptive family may be, deep down part of you still feels cast off, abandoned.

[11 : 18] maybe you gave up a child for adoption. Not because you hated your child, but because you loved them dearly and because you knew that at that point in your life there was no way you could care for them.

And yet you still feel shame. Maybe you've lived most or all of your life as an ethnic minority or a foreigner and every day you feel different, like you'll never fully belong and be valued and understood.

Maybe you're a man and you haven't had a steady job for months or even years. And you feel like a failure. You feel powerless to provide for yourself, for your family.

Maybe you're a woman who's been treated like an object or seen as a threat instead of an ally and you feel dishonored and worthless.

Maybe you've been diagnosed with a mental illness or a learning disability and the label seems to define you. Bipolar, schizophrenic, ADHD.

[12 : 28] Maybe you've been sexually abused. What the abuser did was not your fault but it still leaves a mark. Maybe you feel same-sex attraction. Maybe you've prayed that God would take it away and every day that it doesn't go away you feel more and more ashamed and alienated before God and in the church.

Maybe you're overweight. Makes you perpetually self-conscious, self-condemning. Shame comes from many sources. Shame is very powerful.

It can fill us like leprosy filled this man. It can reside deep within us, hidden under the outward appearance of competence and success.

It can crush us and debilitate us and even kill us. But in this story we see the good news of a Savior who has come to meet us in our shame to cleanse us from our shame and restore us to a place of honor.

In verse 12, the man full of leprosy comes before Jesus. Somehow, we don't know how, he's heard about this man and what he's heard gives him hope.

[13 : 48] What he's heard gives him courage. He ventures into a city, presumably a place where lepers weren't supposed to wander around, too many other people around. He comes close to Jesus, closer than he's supposed to according to the custom of the day and he humbles himself in utter dependence, falling on his face, begging for help, confessing Jesus as Lord, declaring his power to cleanse.

Sometimes, sometimes in our shame, we can hold on to pride. We say, I don't need help. I don't want help.

I could never be helped. And we isolate. And we self-sabotage. And we explode in anger and blame others and live in denial or despair.

But this man had heard something about Jesus and in his desperation, he humbled himself before Jesus. And that is always the way to hope, to humble ourselves before God and say, if you will, you can.

See, three things about Jesus' cleansing of the leper. First, Jesus meets us in our shame. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.

[15 : 10] Jesus didn't have to do that. In other situations, Jesus healed people's sicknesses or drove out demons by his word alone, even from a long distance away.

But here, he intentionally reached out and touched this man who was considered untouchable. You see, if the leper touched anyone, they too would become ritually unclean.

Imagine if you were this man. For months, no one has touched you. Maybe years. Ever since you were diagnosed with this horrible disease that has now filled your body.

The disease has been your death sentence. First, socially. Second, economically. Third, psychologically. and you know eventually, physically. You're lying face down before Jesus, not quite knowing what to expect and you feel his hand on your shoulder.

See, Jesus didn't just treat this man as a project to be fixed. He took the time to touch him, to honor him as a human being made in the image of God.

[16 : 27] James Edwards writes, the outstretched arm of Jesus was a long reach for his day, for any day.

It removes the social, physical, and spiritual chasms prescribed by law and custom alike. Human touch matters in the body of Christ.

You know, that's one reason why listening to a sermon on a podcast is never a substitute for physically coming to church.

You can't take communion online either, by the way. Now, if you're too sick to leave the house or if you're home taking care of sick kids, listening to a sermon online is certainly better than nothing.

But if you can't come to church for a long period of time, let someone know. so that somebody in the body of Christ can come and visit you and pray with you in person.

[17 : 30] Meaningful, purposeful, appropriate human touch communicates welcome, empathy, solidarity, friendship, affection, blessing. A few years ago there was a striking photograph that circulated in the world news.

Pope Francis embracing a man whose body was covered with ugly tumors. He had a disease called, I'm forgetting the name of the disease and I didn't write it down.

But his body was covered with tumors. He was tenderly kissing him on the top of his tumor-ridden head and praying with him. And it made an impression on the world because it wasn't fake.

It bore witness to the world of the character of Christ. Some time ago a single person in our church said to me I often long for human touch. It means a lot to me when someone I know at church comes up and gives me a hug on Sundays.

Often it's the only time in the week that someone does that. Whether it's a hug or a handshake or a fist pump or a high five or a gentle hand on the shoulder, touch makes a difference.

[18 : 41] That's why when Christians pray for one another we sometimes lay hands on one another. You know that's not just a Pentecostal church thing. That's a good normal biblical Christian practice.

Now don't do it if it makes somebody uncomfortable but it can be a very good thing. Some of you know that touch makes a difference because you've been hurt by people who touched you in harmful ways.

In appropriate ways. That can be another cause of lasting shame. But the way to seek healing from those wounds is not to forever recoil from human touch and friendship and intimacy.

It's first and foremost of course to seek intimacy with the Lord and to find comfort in the love of a transcendent God who is unlike anyone else.

but it also looks like receiving His mercy in the form of healthy purposeful appropriate kinds of human touch in friendship in marriage in the church and to let those good and right and honoring touches gradually erase and replace the wounds the deep wounds caused by harmful and violating touch.

[20 : 06] Jesus meets us in our shame but Jesus also cleanses us from our shame. Jesus' touch was not only a sympathetic and reassuring human touch it also conveyed divine cleansing power.

You see according to the Old Testament law if Jesus were simply a normal human being touching the leper would have made Jesus unclean.

But here the reverse happens. Jesus makes the leper clean. Immediately the leprosy left Him. Almost everywhere the Old Testament assumes the principle that we're all familiar with in our daily lives.

Disease is contagious health isn't. Right? Someone shook my hand this morning and they said oh but by the way I have a bad cold and I thought I probably should wash my hands so I don't spread that to everyone else.

I didn't think I'll make this person better because I'm feeling fine today. Right? You got a barrel of apples, there's one rotten apple, that one rotten apple can spoil all the ones right around it.

[21 : 22] All those good apples ain't going to do any good for that rotten apple. Sometimes we apply this to people's character, right? If you're known as an honorable, an upright, upstanding citizen, a morally pure person, don't associate with those people who are known for shameful and scandalous behavior because your reputation is at stake.

people who are not going to do any things. But there's very few places in the Old Testament that hint that one day the reverse could be true, that cleansing could be contagious.

Now, one of these places is in Exodus 29, and you probably haven't read it in a while because it's in the middle of all the regulations about the furniture for the tabernacle. But it says this, Exodus 29, 37, the altar, that is where the priest would offer sacrifice to God, shall be most holy.

Whatever touches the altar shall become holy. Now, that's a very powerful statement because being holy was not just being clean.

Being clean means you're okay, and you're honored, and you're good. Being holy means set apart for God. treasured, uniquely devoted to God.

[22 : 45] The problem was the altar was in the middle of the temple, and the only people who could come into that temple were the priests. So it was inaccessible to almost everyone.

But then we come to Isaiah 6. Last week we read Isaiah 6. Isaiah cried out in the presence of the Lord. He has this vision that he's in the heavenly courtroom, and he cries out, woe is me, because he has a vision of God in his holiness.

Woe is me, I'm lost, for I am a man of unclean lips. I dwell among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. But then what happens next?

One of the seraphim, that is, one of the angels, a representative of the King himself, flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar, and he touched my mouth, and said, behold, this has touched your lips.

Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. That's the exact same pattern that happens in this passage in Luke.

[24 : 00] Luke, the leper, is full of uncleanness. He cannot cleanse himself. He comes before Jesus like Isaiah. Woe is me, I'm lost. He falls on his face, begs for mercy.

It's his only hope. And then Jesus touches him, and he's cleansed. Who is this Jesus? He's holy.

He has come from the very presence of God in heaven. He's not just a good man. He's come to earth to make the holy God accessible to human beings.

And he has divine power, not only to meet us in our shame, but to cleanse us from our shame, and clothe us in his holiness, and call us into his service.

His authoritative word accompanies his healing touch. I will be clean. Through his touch and his word, Jesus cleanses us from shame.

[25 : 10] Sometimes it happens instantly like it did here. Sometimes it happens gradually as we abide in Jesus' word and rest in his love and participate in the body of believers.

Maybe you believe in Jesus. Maybe you've believed in him for a long time. But every day you battle self-condemnation and shame.

Let me encourage you to keep fighting that battle. Don't give more authority to your feelings of worthlessness than to Jesus. Let me also recommend a book that's on the bookstall downstairs called Shame Interrupted.

How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejections by Ed Welch. It's not a quick and easy read. Because it's not a quick and easy topic.

But it's really, really good. But most of all, let me point you to what God says in his word. The word of God says Jesus is not ashamed to call us.

[26 : 15] That is, everyone who looks to him like the leper and trusts in him. Brothers and sisters. The Bible says he has washed away our sins.

That's what we celebrate in baptism. It says he has filled us with his very own spirit. The promise of glory to come. It says he welcomes us to feast at his table.

We'll do that in a few minutes. And he clothes us with honor and beauty. I want to read from Isaiah chapter 61. You don't have to turn there.

Just listen. This is the same chapter Jesus read from in his sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth when he said, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

In other words, this is why I have come. So if you, like the leper, have turned to Jesus and fallen at his feet and cried out for his mercy, I want you to hear these words because they are for you.

[27 : 13] They're not just for somebody else sitting next to you. They're for you. Christ has come to bestow on you a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

You will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. You will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.

You will be called priests of the Lord. You know, the New Testament says that we are priests of the Lord. That means we can come into his presence freely. There's not all those barriers anymore.

You will be named ministers of our God, servants of our God. Instead of your shame, you will receive a double portion. Instead of disgrace, you will rejoice in your inheritance and everlasting joy will be yours.

You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. No longer will they call you deserted or name your land desolate, but you will be called Hephzibah, that is, my delight is in her and your land Beulah, married, for the Lord will take delight in you.

[28 : 37] As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you. From Zephaniah 3, the Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.

He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by his love. He will exalt over you with loud singing, I will save the lame and gather the outcasts and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

This is what Jesus has come to do, to cleanse us from our shame. Finally, he gives us a place of honor. Verse 14, he charged him to tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing as Moses commanded for a proof to them.

You might say, that sounds sort of anticlimactic. Don't tell anyone about the great thing that's just happened to you, just go to the priest. But actually, back then, going to the priest was the only way he could be fully restored to participate in his community.

Back then, the priest function, one of the functions of the priest was sort of as a public health official. He was the one who would examine you and either say, you're unclean, so you're on quarantine, or you're clean, and you're free to go as you please.

[30 : 11] So Jesus was saying, respect the authorities that are in place, do what the law says, but then he says more. He says, do it for a proof to them. That is, as a witness to them. He's saying, don't just go to the priest to get your clean bill of health and be officially cleared, but go as a living witness, a visible demonstration of the cleansing and healing power of Jesus.

You see, Jesus doesn't just cleanse us from shame. He sends us on a mission to be a living testimony of who he is and what he's done. When we've experienced the cleansing power of Jesus, one writer says, he sends us out to touch the hurting places in the lives of others.

We are now part of a healing community that the Holy Spirit uses to make people whole. Not surprisingly, verse 15, the word spreads, the crowds gather to hear his word and experience his healing touch.

You know, it's interesting how Luke ends this passage in verse 16. He ends this passage by remarking on Jesus' frequent habit of withdrawing to pray. You see, Jesus' ministry was beginning to grow here.

He was teaching in synagogues. He was healing. He was driving out demons. He was gathering disciples. He had cleansed this leper. He was in high demand. Many responsibilities and many good opportunities right in front of him.

[31 : 43] But Jesus wasn't exclusively focused on gathering the largest following possible as quickly as possible. He wasn't driven by the desire to please everyone who was constantly making requests of him.

He would withdraw and pray. Now, if you've experienced the cleansing power of Jesus and if you've been called into his mission, sometimes life can get pretty busy.

Lots of responsibilities and lots of good opportunities. And Luke wants to remind us that Jesus prioritized prayer. He prioritized intimate communion with his heavenly father because ultimately he lived, that is who he lived to please.

Yes, Jesus restored the leper to a place of honor in his society. That's why he sent, part of why he sent him to the priest. And yes, he can bring you from a place of powerlessness and voicelessness and shame and rejection to a position of honor.

and even leadership in his kingdom. But never forget, the greatest honor before the world cannot compare to the privilege of coming before the throne of God, the throne of grace with freedom and confidence because through Jesus Christ, God is now your heavenly father and you can freely approach him and spend time with him.

[33 : 17] That's the greatest honor of all. We have free access and confidence to enter the presence of God. Gerhardus Vos wrote the following, to be a Christian is to live one's life not merely in obedience to God nor merely in dependence on God nor even merely for the sake of God.

It is to stand in conscious reciprocal fellowship with God. To be identified with him in thought and purpose and work to receive from him and to give back to him.

He's talking about union with Christ. In the Holy Spirit through which we enter the presence of God the Father.

Jesus touches the leper. He cleanses the leper. He calls us into his mission and he gives us the honor of belonging to him.

Let's pray. Oh God who has prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding.

[34 : 41] Pour into our heart such a love toward you that loving you above all things we may obtain your promises which exceed all that we can desire.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.