

Mark 1:40-45

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[0 : 00] If you would turn with me in a Bible to Mark chapter 1, we'll be looking at that at the end of that chapter tonight.

If you're looking in one of the few Bibles, it is on page 837. We're looking at Mark chapter 1, starting at verse 40 and going to the end of the chapter.

It says this, And a leper came to him, came to Jesus, imploring him and kneeling, said to him, If you will, you can make me clean.

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once and said to him, See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priests, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded for a proof to them.

[1 : 25] 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. A few years ago, the New York Times published an article by a doctor who works in an intensive care unit at a hospital.

And he began the article by telling this story. He says, It was one night when I was on call, I visited a patient who had been in the ICU for nine days, recovering from a procedure to remove a major blood clot.

She was doing well, breathing on her own, with normal blood pressure and regular heartbeat. After a moment, she opened her eyes. Welcome, doctor, she said.

Would you like me to make you a drink? You know where everything is, she said, and make me one as well. Well, I asked her where she was. In my apartment, she said.

[2 : 28] I walked up to her IV pole and squeezed the bag of saline that hung next to her bed. She thanked me and went off to sleep. The article went on to say about a third of patients who spend more than five days in an ICU experience some form of psychotic reaction.

Even if they've never had any psychiatric problems before, patients may experience anxiety, become paranoid, hear voices and see things that are not there, become disoriented, agitated, or even violent.

Now, of course, doctors want to know why this happens. Why does being in a hospital seem to create new problems, even as it solves other problems?

Is it a response to physical pain? Or is it sleep deprivation from the nurses waking you up every hour during the night? Or is it that you feel like you're no longer in control of your life?

Well, all those things could play a role, but one of the major realities of being in a hospital, especially being in an ICU, is being isolated. Being isolated from normal routines and from normal interactions with family and friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

[3 : 46] Now, being in the ICU is maybe an extreme example, but sickness of whatever kind, whether physical or mental, can be an incredibly isolating experience.

And isolation can drive you crazy. Now, of course, in some circumstances, isolation is the only way that we know of that we can deal with sickness and prevent it from spreading.

Right? At a minor level, that's why my son's preschool sends home a big note that says, if your child has a fever, or has had a fever in the last 24 hours, or has vomited, you better not send him to school.

Right? Right? And every school and every daycare center has strict rules about that, because they don't want diseases to spread, or more serious cases. If you visit certain people in the hospital, you might have to wear a gown, or even put on a mask, or put on gloves, so they don't get what you have, and you don't get what they have.

Or for better and for worse, this is why we have psychiatric hospitals, or institutions to keep people from harming themselves or harming others. Right?

[5 : 04] Normally, sickness is contagious. Health isn't. And so we protect against the spread of sickness, partly by isolating sick people.

Now, in this passage, we see a very sick man, a leper, a man with a dreaded skin disease. Now, back then, the word leprosy covered a wide range of skin diseases, including boils, burns, itches, ringworm, and scalp conditions, as well as what's now called Hansen's disease, leprosy that makes you lose feeling in your skin, and your nerves, and your limbs, and eyes.

It was a horrible disease. And back then, leprosy was nearly incurable. It was a common saying among Jewish rabbis that curing a leper was as difficult as raising a dead man to life.

And in order to prevent the dreaded disease from spreading, lepers were required to be isolated from the rest of the community. So Leviticus 13 and 14 give a whole bunch of rules, but the end of Leviticus 13, starting at verse 45, says 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 the lower part of his face 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. Did you hear those words?

[6 : 42] Four times. Unclean, unclean, unclean, unclean. He shall live alone outside. You see, being a leper didn't just make you sick, it made you unclean and alone and isolated.

You were cut off from your family, from your job, from your friends and your neighbors. You couldn't touch anyone else or even come close to them because otherwise you would make them unclean.

So the only family, the only friends, the only neighbors that you really had were other people who had the same disease. Other unclean lepers.

And you couldn't go into a city. You couldn't go into any city with walls. And so you had to live out in the unprotected countryside.

You could only attend the worship services in the synagogue if they had a screen and a separate seating area to separate you from everyone else.

[7 : 46] It was an incredibly isolating experience. It was a little bit like having AIDS in the 1970s or 1980s when it was just beginning to spread and before antiviral drugs were available.

Or maybe a parallel today would be being homeless and sleeping on a bench on the green. Or even under a bridge and getting up in the morning and pushing a shopping cart down the street and hunting in other people's trash cans for bottles and cans.

And everybody steps carefully around you because they don't want to touch you. Because in their eyes, you're dirty. And you would make them unclean.

That's a little bit of what it was like to be a leper. To be unclean. Now the leper in this story, he's a desperate man. And so because he's desperate, he takes a risk.

He approaches Jesus. And he pleads for help. Now according to the law, he wasn't supposed to come close to anyone else.

[8 : 56] So he's taking a risk in even coming close to Jesus and kneeling before him. And he says, if you will, you can make me clean. The leper sees something different in Jesus that draws him to come close.

And in this passage, we see two extraordinary things about Jesus. We see Jesus' extraordinary authority and we see Jesus' extraordinary compassion.

So first, Jesus' extraordinary authority. Verses 41 and 42, it says, Jesus was moved with pity or moved with compassion. And he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean.

And immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean. Now do you notice Jesus deliberately stretched out his hand and touched the man with leprosy? According to the law, if you touched an unclean person, that made you unclean.

And if you became unclean, you had to go through a whole process of ritual cleansing, of separating yourself from other people and then bathing and going through this whole process in order for you to become clean again.

[10 : 16] Because again, just like today, normally sickness and uncleanness spreads. Health doesn't. Right?

If you're unclean, you're contagious. You might make somebody else unclean. If you're healthy, you're not going to make somebody else healthy just by touching them. But here, the effect is reversed.

When Jesus touches the leper, instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the leper becomes clean. And if you were here last week, we saw in this passage that Jesus has this extraordinary authority, this unequal power, so that his touch overrides and overrules this horrible skin disease.

And his will trumps the Old Testament ceremonial law. That Jesus has this amazing authority. Now, according to the Old Testament, the priests who served in the temple had the responsibility to examine people with skin disease and pronounce them either clean or unclean.

They were a little bit like the doctors in those days. But you know, Jesus doesn't merely act like a doctor here. Jesus doesn't say, hey, come here, let me examine you. Hmm, do I see any white spots?

[11 : 41] No, I don't see any white spots. Ah, you're okay. No. Jesus doesn't just pronounce him clean. Jesus touches him and makes him clean. He does what the priests could never do.

And that's why he says what he says in verse 43 and 44. Now, maybe that was a little confusing when we first read it. You might think, well, why does Jesus say, don't tell nothing to nobody?

It's actually a double negative in the Greek, so you can translate it however you want. The point is, he says, don't say anything to anyone. I say, well, why would Jesus want him to keep it to himself?

Well, the main reason is what he continues, what he says in the rest of the verse. Go, show yourself to the priest. Right? You had to, you had to get a clean bill of health from the priest so you could be declared clean and interact normally with other people again without making them unclean.

And as part of the process, you'd offer a sacrifice to thank God for making you well if somehow you recovered from one of these skin diseases. So basically, Jesus is saying, I want you to go through the official legal channels so that you can be publicly declared clean and restored to your place in society.

- [13 : 03] But he also says, at the end of verse 44, he says, do this for a proof to them. It's a legal word, proof or testimony. In other words, to demonstrate Jesus' authority to the priests and the religious leaders of the day so they could see that this man was living proof that Jesus could do what nobody else could.
- So he says, go to the priests so they can see that I've done for you what nobody else can. So they can examine you themselves and they can have living proof right in front of them that I can do what nobody else can.
- So that's the first thing we see, Jesus' extraordinary authority to cleanse this man where nobody else could. But we also see a second thing.
- We see Jesus' extraordinary compassion. He not only cleanses the leper where nobody else could, he cleanses the leper in a way that nobody else would.
- Now verse 41, it says Jesus was moved with pity. Now when we hear that word pity, sometimes we think something like this. We think of maybe watching on the news or hearing a really sad story or looking down at somebody else and thinking, and we say, oh, that's so sad.
- [14 : 24] We make a sad face and maybe we just say sad things for a few minutes. And then we get distracted and then we go on with our life and we don't really do anything different.
- And we think, oh, I felt pity. I felt so bad for that awful thing that happened. Well, that's actually not what true pity or compassion is in the Bible.
- The English word compassion is from a Latin word that means to suffer with someone. And the Greek word in this passage refers to the, it's a word that refers to the inner parts of a person.
- Literally the inner parts of your chest, your gut, your heart, your lungs. In other words, compassion is this deep feeling of mercy towards somebody else from deep inside you.
- But it's not just a feeling, it's a feeling that results in action. You see, that's why Jesus touches the man. He doesn't just feel pity for the man and think, oh, what a, what a sad story.
- [15 : 36] But he reaches out and touches him. Now, Jesus didn't have to touch him in order to make him well. There's a story in the Old Testament, probably the most famous story in the Old Testament of a leper being cleansed is found in 2 Kings chapter 5.
- And Naaman, who is a commander, who is an army commander in Syria, goes to the prophet Elisha in Israel and asks to be cleansed of his leprosy. And Elisha doesn't even come out of his house.
- He sends a messenger to say, Naaman, go dunk yourself in the river seven times. Naaman doesn't like that idea, but eventually he is persuaded by somebody else that he should at least try, you know, at least do what the prophet says.
- So he does it, and by the grace of God, he gets cleansed. But Elisha never touched him. Jesus didn't have to touch him. Actually, in Luke chapter 17, there's ten other lepers that Jesus cleanses, and he doesn't touch them at all.
- So why does he touch him? Think about it. If you were that leper, for as long as you've had leprosy, nobody else has touched you.
- [16 : 57] Because nobody else wants to touch you because they'll become unclean. And the only other people who might have touched you were other people who had the same disease. And Jesus touched him to make a personal connection with him.
- That it wasn't just blessings from a distance, but it was blessings through a touch. But you know what? There was a cost to Jesus touching him.

And we don't, you know, you might not see this when you first read the passage, but look down at verse 44 and 45. Verse 44, Jesus tells the leper, keep quiet and go right to the priest.

But in verse 45, the leper goes around broadcasting the news. He's talking freely, or literally, the word is preaching. It's the same word that's used for Jesus, preaching his message.

The leper goes around preaching about it. Telling everybody. And we have no idea if he ever went to the priest or not. And then it says, as a result, Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places.

[18 : 15] At the beginning of this story, the leper is on the outside. He can't enter a town. He can't touch anyone. He can't participate normally in society.

He's on the outside, and he's unclean. And Jesus is on the inside. But at the end of the story, it's reversed.

The leper's on the inside. He's going everywhere. He's clean. He can touch anyone. He's healed. But Jesus is on the outside.

He can't enter a city. He's in desolate places. You see, this whole story, it's a little story right at the beginning of Mark's gospel, but it's a picture of the whole purpose why Jesus came to the world.

The whole purpose of his life and ministry is about his extraordinary authority to do what nobody else could and his extraordinary compassion to do what nobody else would.

[19 : 22] And of course, where does that all lead? Jesus in the end, it ultimately leads him to die on a cross outside the city walls, rejected and alone and unclean.

So that we, like the leper, might be cleansed and accepted and received on the inside of God's family now and forever.

that's what Jesus came to do. He came to demonstrate his authority and he came to touch us with his compassion at a great cost to himself so that we could be cleansed and received.

Now, what do we take away from this passage? Let me give you two categories of applications. Maybe we can talk about these a little more when we have our question and answer time in a few minutes.

Maybe you can identify first, maybe you can identify with this leper. Now, maybe you have an illness, whether it's a physical illness or emotional or some other kind of illness and because of your illness, you've lived for years in isolation and you've always felt excluded on the outside.

[20 : 47] Maybe you've looked everywhere for a cure and found none or maybe you've given up and you just hang your head. Or maybe it's not a physical illness, maybe you feel dirty on the inside because of shameful things that other people have done to you in the past and you feel like damaged goods, too broken to ever be useful again.

or maybe you feel dirty because of shameful things that you've done to yourself or to other people. And even if nobody else knows the whole story, you know that on the inside you're a mess and you deal with the shame and guilt of your own failure before God in the past and even daily in the present.

If any of those describe you, let me invite you. Come before Jesus like the leper did. He came to Jesus.

He said, Jesus, if you will, you can make me clean. Jesus has the power to make you clean like nobody else can.

And Jesus did what was required to make you clean like nobody else would. You know, one of the biggest lies in the world is that you have to clean yourself up before you come to God, before you come to church.

[22 : 19] And the truth is exactly the opposite. You need to come to Jesus so that He can clean you up. And you'll find Jesus here in the church. Not in this building, but when believers gather together.

Jesus is present here with us to cleanse us and heal us. And you know, in reality, every single one of us is like this leper before God.

Before God, we're all unclean. In the Bible, it says, all our righteous deeds are like filthy, blood-stained rags. So what's the church?

The church is a bunch of desperate lepers who found cleansing in Jesus. So whoever you are, whatever you look like on the outside, and whatever you feel on the inside, you're not any different from all the rest of us when we stand before God.

to all of us. Jesus invites all of us to come to Him as you are. Maybe come to Him for the first time.

[23 : 39] Or maybe come to Him for a renewed experience of His mercy and His cleansing. So that's the first thing. Maybe you identify with the leper.

We all identify with the leper. Maybe, second thing, maybe you identify as a follower of Jesus, as a disciple of Jesus. As we've said, the church is a community of people like this leper, who are spiritually unclean, and excluded from God's family, who have been brought in by the authority and compassion of Jesus Christ.

But you know, we're also called to be a community that extends Jesus' compassion and proclaims Jesus' authority in the world. So what does that look like?

Well, it looks like being a community where we don't ignore or avoid people when they get sick or weak, but instead reach out to them and touch them and connect with them.

A few weeks ago, I had the chance to visit a lady named Miss Frances. Miss Frances is an elderly member of this church. Many of you won't know her because she hasn't been able to come to church regularly for a few years.

[24 : 52] She's lost most of her short-term memory, and she lives in a care facility full-time. When I arrived to visit her, she recognized me because I've been in this church for long enough that she remembered me, and we were walking towards where we were going to sit down, and she said to somebody else, one of the staff at the place, she said, see, my church hasn't forgotten me.

Now, you know, she wasn't just talking about me because I've only been to visit her once or twice in the last year, but there are one or two or more people from this church who have taken it upon themselves to visit her regularly, and she remembers who they are.

Even though she's lost most of her short-term memory, she remembers the people from church who've come to visit her, and she said to me, my church hasn't forgotten me, and it's a sign to her and to everybody else around her that Jesus hasn't forgotten her.

Right? Now, sometimes we do this well, and sometimes we don't do this well, but this is part of what it looks like. A community where we reach out and connect with people when they're sick or weak.

And second, a community that extends Jesus' compassionate touch to outsiders. believers. This leper was an outsider back in the day. He was somebody that most religious people didn't want to deal with, because it was too messy, and too complicated, and too time-consuming, and seemingly hopeless from a human point of view, but he's exactly the kind of person that Jesus touched.

[26 : 39] And so as followers of Jesus, we're called to touch others, to engage with people who are broken, needy, dirty, smelly, rejected, alone, sick, in the hospital, have complicated issues, and are spiritual outsiders.

Now, there's a cost to doing that. Right? It costs time, and energy, and money. Sometimes you get funny looks from people.

They say, why are you hanging out with them? Why did you invite them to come along with us when we were just going to hang out? Right?

That's what Jesus did. He invited us to come and be with him when we didn't deserve to. Now, we can't do everything.

We can't touch every single, lonely, isolated person in this city. We don't have the power to fix people. Only Jesus does. Sometimes people aren't willing to be made clean.

[27 : 48] But, you know, we know Jesus. He has the only cure that really works. And so, let's extend his compassionate touch so that other people might experience that, his cleansing, and being received into his family, just as each one of us have, who have put our trust in him.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we praise you for your authority. Lord, your power.

Lord, that you could touch that man. That you can touch people today and make us clean. Lord, not only physically on the outside, but spiritually on the inside.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your compassion. That you have paid the price on the cross. That we might be cleansed of all our sin and guilt. That we might be received into your family.

As people who belong to you. And are loved and known by you. Lord, we pray that we would, each of us, recognize that we are no different than this leper when we stand before you.

[29 : 09] And we pray that because we realize that, and because we have experienced your saving grace, Lord, that we would extend your touch to others. We pray this in your name.

Amen.