JESUS CLEANSES A LEPER

Luke 5:12–16

Key Verse: 5:13

“And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately the leprosy left him.”

Have you ever experienced some kind of contamination? Today people who get COVID have to lock themselves in a room for many days. But what if you had something else? All people dread bed bugs because they’re so hard to get rid of and so easy to spread. But what if people believe you’re marked with the indelible stain of “social contamination”? It might be the stigma of your race, your family background, your credit history, your well-known failures, even a criminal record? Being shunned, shamed or isolated can leave invisible scars on the soul. In today’s passage Jesus, early on in his ministry, encounters a leper, one of the most shunned types of people in his society. It’s a brief incident. But the details of this story spread widely, especially to those who’d been ostracized. It was a very popular story in early Christianity. What are we to make of Jesus’ encounter with this man? Could it help us in our own lives, or, in the ways we interact with others? What is God really saying to us here? May he speak to our hearts through his word today.

Verse 12a says, “While he was in one of the cities…” As we’ve seen, Jesus was traveling throughout the towns of Judea, following God’s leading (4:43,44). In the previous passage we saw a crowd pressing in on him to hear the word of God. But here there’s just one man coming to him. Luke the medical doctor describes the man as “full of leprosy.” In the Bible the word “leprosy” actually refers to multiple skin diseases we still have today. In the Old Testament God gave specific instructions about skin disease to keep it from spreading among his people (Lev13,14). People had to watch out for the smallest white patches anywhere on their bodies. But in this case the man is “full of leprosy,” meaning it’s now in the advanced stages.

In that condition this man is not supposed to be in a city where many people are. But he must have heard the reports that Jesus could cure not only people with “unclean spirits,” but anyone sick with various diseases (4:36,37,40). One day he overheard the news that Jesus was nearby. So he broke the rules and came. Verse 12b says, “And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, ‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.’” Somehow he recognizes Jesus right away. He’s so humble. He knows he needs help. He’s desperate. He falls on his face, begging. He calls Jesus “Lord.” He’s confident that even in this advanced stage Jesus can cure him completely. The question he has is, is Jesus willing?

Why would he think Jesus would be unwilling? It’s probably related to how we tend to see human misfortunes generally. Then as now, people think others who are suffering are probably getting what they deserve. In other words, God must be punishing this leper for some sin in his life. This is based on a legalistic, judgmental way of thinking, and it’s really dark. We can even think this way about ourselves. Our sin makes us feel not only punished but also worthless. With all our imperfections, failures and weaknesses, why would God even bother with us? It’s not just about physical illness. All the problems in our lives can make us feel unwanted, like damaged goods. When this man full of leprosy comes and falls on his face before him, begging so desperately, how does Jesus respond? Read verse 13. Two things are important here.

**First** is Jesus’ touch. It says Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the man. This is totally taboo. Not only is it associated with catching the disease; it makes a person ceremonially unclean—they wouldn’t be able to go to the temple to worship God, or be around other devout people. This man is clearly diseased and most likely infectious. There’s no need to touch him, or is there? Jesus could have healed him with the sheer power of his word. But look at this: he stretches out his hand and touches this hideous man, even before saying anything. His gentle touch more than proves that Jesus is willing. Luke often mentions how Jesus touches people (7:14; 13:13; 18:15; 22:51). In this case, Jesus wants this man to know that he loves him, accepts him, sees him with dignity as a human being, so worth saving. To Jesus there’s no stigma too severe, no barriers too insurmountable, no disease too horrible, no risk too great for any human being. His touch is a key element in healing all the emotional and psychological wounds of this man’s disease. His touch epitomizes the grace of God that touches us even in the worst of our sin.

What should we learn from this? It means we can come to him as we are. We all need to know that, whatever we’re experiencing, Jesus has such tender mercy on us. He truly cares, and he wants to heal us in every way. He’s still the same Jesus, yesterday and today and forever (Heb13:8). He’s still so personal. And nothing in our lives is too ugly or dirty or shameful for him to touch and heal. So why are we staying away from Jesus? We may feel cursed by all the bad things that have happened to us, and, on top of all that, by our sin. But on the cross Jesus became a curse for us, to take away all our sense of curse and condemnation (Gal3:13; Ro8:1). Even if our sin is as bad as this man’s leprosy, Jesus is inviting us to come to him. No matter who or what we are, or what we’ve done, we can come to him with confidence. Hebrews 4:16 urges us: “Let us then with confidence draw hear to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (cf. Heb10:19–23; Eph3:12). We just have to humble ourselves to do it.

We also need to learn from Jesus how to reach out and gently touch others, especially when they’re hurting. We live in a hurting world. It’s because sin leaves us all with various kinds of spiritual diseases (Ps103:3). Then, sick and hurting people hurt others. And, just like in this passage, one of the greatest hurts people are still experiencing is social rejection. It’s awful. Sick and hurting people don’t need to hear us explain what’s wrong. They don’t need to hear platitudes from us like, “Everything’s going to be okay.” We shouldn’t avoid them, or try to fix them quickly, or start talking about our own experiences, or belittle their feelings. To touch people like Jesus, we might start by just listening. We might try to learn to share their emotions, or just spend time with them, just be there for them, be patient with them, just hold them and let them know they’re not alone. Ultimately, we reach out and touch people to help them come to Jesus and experience *his* personal touch, which can really cure them. So, are we hiding from people and their problems? Or are we touching them like Jesus would?

**Second** is Jesus’ word. Look verse 13 again. Jesus didn’t just touch him and leave him in his misery. He spoke one word in Greek: “Katharisai.” This word is where the name “Kathy” comes from; the root word in Greek means “pure.” It can mean to be cleansed of physical dirt or filth, to be cleansed morally or spiritually, to be purified in heart and mind—to be cleansed in every way. What happens when Jesus speaks this one word, “Be clean”? Verse 13b says, “And immediately the leprosy left him.” This tells us something important. On our own we can try to clean up our lives, and many people succeed to some extent. But even with all our best efforts our sin is still there. It’s only the power of Jesus’ word that can cleanse us deep within (Jn15:3; Eph5:26). Ultimately his word “Be clean” points us to his shed blood on the cross, which purifies and cleanses both our consciences and our hearts (Heb1:3b; 9:14; Tit2:14; Ac15:9; 1Jn1:7,9).

Jesus’ love is not to just accept us in our sin and leave us there. He wants to purify us from the chronic sin in our lives. It’s because this is what’s at the root of our real problems and what’s making us so miserable. We can’t get rid of our chronic sins, but his word “Be clean” actually has the power to cure us, if we would just accept it by faith. We need to take hold of his word “Be clean” and then, based on it, and depending on his help, start taking active and practical steps to cleanse ourselves from whatever is dishonorable or defiling in our heart and body and spirit (2Co7:1; 2Ti2:21; Jas4:8).

After his physical and emotional healing Jesus says one more thing to this man. Read verse 14. Though he broke a rule by touching this leper, Jesus deeply respected the law of Moses. He also was thinking practically about how this man could be restored to having a real social life. In modern terms he wanted him to have a clean bill of health so that he could mingle freely with all the healthy people. Jesus cares for us physically, spiritually and even socially. We too should care about people being restored in every way. In our society people have all kinds of broken relationships. So many are estranged from their own family members and haven’t spoken to them for years. As followers of Jesus we need to be praying for this kind of healing in people’s lives, too.

Luke concludes this story with one more important detail. Look at verses 15,16. As this report about Jesus touching and healing a leper spreads, great crowds gather to hear him and be healed of their infirmities. Finally a real shepherd of people has appeared! Luke’s description shows the tremendous spiritual need of those times. But again he shows us how Jesus avoids popularity. He would withdraw to desolate places and pray. The expression in Greek literally means he was doing this regularly.

Why? It’s because ministering to sick and needy people can be so draining. On top of that, life can have so many demands and pressures and distractions that it can really run us ragged. Jesus was the Son of God, but he was also fully human. He was without sin, but even *he* needed God’s help. If he was praying regularly, why aren’t we? Like our Lord Jesus, we need to learn to withdraw to a quiet place where we can pray. Strength comes from God, and we can be strengthened spiritually only when we spend time with him. Prayer isn’t about keeping legalistic religious rules; it’s about finding strength in God himself.

Let’s read our key verse again, verse 13. May God help each one of us experience our Lord Jesus’ touch in our lives, and, the power of his word. And may he equip each one of us to be healers like our Lord Jesus in our hurting world.