

A Leper & the Lord
Mark 1:40-45
ABC 2/20/22

Over the past 2 years, have you ever felt isolated from others? Not having the ability to gather together & interact face-to-face like we're used to has been difficult. Not shaking hands or hugging has been rough. Social distancing has been disruptive. Not being able to see facial expressions because they're hidden behind masks makes communication more difficult. As tough as all this has been, imagine if social distancing was mandated at 150 ft? What if you weren't even allowed to enter the church? The store? Your own home? How awful would that be? What if every time you saw someone you had to yell, *Unclean! Unclean!?* While we think we've had it bad, it's nothing compared to what lepers had to go through in 1st century Israel. We're in Mk 1:40-45 today so turn there as we get some background. In the ancient world, there were 72 skin diseases under the heading of leprosy. Mark doesn't explain which variety this man had. It was probably what we know as Hansen's disease, the worst form of leprosy, but any form of leprosy was tragic & disastrous. If you were a Jew in the ancient world & you woke up one morning with a strange appearance on your skin, it would strike terror in your heart. You were required to go to the priest, who determined whether it was harmless or leprosy. If it was leprosy, that not only meant you had a dreadful physical disease that would be with you for the rest of your life, it meant you were also unclean. You weren't allowed near the temple & couldn't enter the gates of Jerusalem or any walled city (2 Kgs 7:3). You had to live alone or with other lepers, without the fellowship of family & friends. To ensure against contact with society, lepers were required to make their appearance as repugnant as possible. You wore tattered clothes & had unkempt hair. It was necessary to cover the lower portion of your mouth so you could be noticed as a leper from a distance. You weren't allowed to come within 50 paces of another human being. You were ostracized from society & had to cry, *Unclean! Unclean!* whenever you came in range of others. Think about how you'd feel shouting this while begging outside Walmart or Costco. Josephus writes that interacting with a leper was equivalent to interacting with a corpse. The disfigurement associated with leprosy comes because the body's warning system of pain is destroyed. The disease brings numbness, beginning

with the extremities. The devastation that follows comes from things like reaching into a fire to retrieve something or washing one's face with scalding water.¹ Rodents sometimes chew on sleeping lepers so at least one doctor, after helping a leper, would send a cat home with him as a normal post-operative procedure. The man in our story was **full of leprosy** (Lk), implying an advanced stage, from head to foot, rotten, stinking, & repulsive. By Jesus' time, rabbinical teaching, with its absurd rules, had made matters even worse. If a leper even stuck his head inside a house, the house was then unclean. It was illegal to even greet a leper. According to the Talmud, the closest a leper could come to someone without the disease was 6 ft. On windy days, the distance was extended to 150 feet. *If an unclean man afflicted with leprosy stood under a tree & a clean man passed by, the latter becomes unclean. If a clean man stood under a tree & an unclean one passed by, the former remains clean. If the latter stood still, the former becomes unclean.*² We could go on & on. There were no illusions in the leper's life as to who he was & what his condition was. The disease robbed them of their health & the sentence imposed on them robbed them of their occupation, family, fellowship, & community. The reference to Miriam's leprosy in Num 12:12 prompted various rabbis to speak of lepers as *the living dead*, whose cure was as impossible as raising the dead. Stop here & realize that the spiritual reality for all of us is that we are spiritual lepers. We'll come back to this in a bit. Unfortunately, unlike this leper, we're often oblivious of our sin & clueless of our condition.³ **40-45**

1. The Request of the Leper We don't know much about this man because the focus of this passage is on Jesus. But we know that driven by his desperation & violating all the religious rules, he made his way to Jesus who'd been healing many. This leper came within arm's reach to Jesus. This is remarkable, especially in view of Lev 13:46 which says the leper **shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp**. Compare this with the **10 leprous men who stood at a distance** from Jesus in Lk 17. His actions may have been socially unacceptable, but his attitude toward Jesus was both respectful & reverential (Mt 8:2). Luke notes **he fell on his face**. Recognizing his own unworthiness,

¹ Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* p 32

² William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 1, Preaching the Word, p 55

the leper called Jesus **Lord** (5:12), & entrusted himself to Jesus & His well-known power, **saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean."** Clearly this man had heard of the power & authority of Jesus. He'd heard of the miracles He'd done & didn't come to Jesus questioning His ability to heal. He came wondering of Jesus' willingness. The leper knew how bad off he was, but he also had confidence in Jesus. He probably didn't have a great theological understanding, but he was pragmatic: *If Jesus can do it for others, He can do it for me.* But where the leper has hesitation, we have certainty. We know the gospel. We know Jesus' heart. **For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, & to give His life a ransom for many** (Mk 10:45). We know He is willing & powerful enough to cleanse us from our sins & to save us. We can only imagine the people's reaction as they watched the scene unfold. Horror mixed with indignation must have swept through the crowd of onlookers. Some probably shrank back in fear, covering their mouths as they quickly retreated. Perhaps others glanced around for stones & sticks to drive away the unwanted outcast. Others surely stood watching in stunned silence, wondering how Jesus would respond.

2. The Response of the Lord 41-44

Jesus was **moved with compassion.** Living in the midst of a people who were placing all the emphasis on legal trivialities, Jesus stands out as the One whose emphasis is on **the weightier provisions of the law: justice & mercy & faithfulness** (Mt 23:23). The sorrows of the people are His own sorrows. He dearly & loves those who are burdened & is eager to help them. It's an amazing moment. Here's the Creator, the One who made this world perfect, now looking at the disaster & horror that sin brought into the world. Jesus wasn't angry because the man had violated the law by coming to Him. He was filled with a righteous indignation against the ravages of the sinful world, such as disease. He hated it, but He cared for the person afflicted by it. What Jesus does is almost impossible for us to imagine. He doesn't just talk to this man & speak to him in a way that cleanses him. No, Jesus does what is shocking. He reaches out & touches this leprous man & he is made clean. The touch of Jesus was significant in 2 ways. In Lev 5:3, the law included a regulation forbidding the Jews from defiling themselves by touching anything or anybody that was unclean, including a leper. Jesus could have healed him with a word. But I think He wanted to make a point,

one that would've left a lasting impression. God's infinite compassion was dramatically shown in this profound act of kindness. His love was such that He was willing to touch those whom no one else would even come close to. From the leper's perspective it was an unheard-of act of **compassion** which must have moved him deeply & strengthened him in his conviction he hadn't asked for help in vain. Imagine the leper's longing for a touch or a caress. No human contact or touch for probably years. Time stood still as Jesus touched him. Jesus' touch expresses more than superficial contact. It's often translated *to take hold of*.⁴ We can't imagine the ecstasy that must have jolted through the leper's body while the onlookers & disciples were shocked. Why did Jesus do this? He wanted the leper to feel His willingness & sympathy. The touch said, *I'm with you, I understand, I love you*. But there was also a theological reason: The touch of Jesus' holy hand on the unclean leper is a picture of the incarnation. Jesus took on flesh, became sin for us, & offers us His purity. God **made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him** (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus laid hold of our flesh. He touched us & healed us. From the perspective of Jesus' relationship to the religious system, it indicated He didn't hesitate to act in violation of its regulations when the situation demanded. The Lord Jesus Christ, the sinless One, whose food was to do the will of the Father to fulfill all righteousness (Jn 4:34; Mt 3:15), violated the ceremonial law. Not only was the leper not allowed to touch a non-leper, the non-leper wasn't allowed to touch a leper. But Jesus touched him. Mark shows us Jesus is the Lord of the law, with the authority to set it aside for His own redemptive processes. Think of it like this: Sometimes you find yourself in a traffic jam. Maybe there's been a minor accident or road construction & you're waved through a red light. The current situation supersedes the written law, so you must obey the one directing traffic rather than the red light. Jesus is the embodiment of the law & the enforcer of the law. Just as God brought the world into existence by His word, so Jesus exercised that divine right in the case of this leper. Jesus' touch & words meant the same thing: **I am willing; be cleansed**. This wasn't a priestly pronouncement, as is made clear in vs 43-44, but a declaration that healing was immediate & complete (42). This healing was visible to all who met the man.

⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *Christian Aspects of Life*, p 354

There was no period of recovery or recuperation. He who had come disfigured, defiled, & despicable was instantly transformed into a man in full health, completely cured, & ready to be restored to society. His sores were gone. His limbs were made whole. His skin looked like new. His face was smooth & unscarred. Even today, in an age of medical marvels, nothing can compare to this kind of miraculous healing.

We can't look at this account without seeing a beautiful picture of the saving work of Jesus. We're all spiritual lepers. The disease of sin disfigures our hearts, thoughts, & desires. It distorts our thoughts & disfigures our actions. There's no cure for the disease of sin in & of ourselves. Sin leads to damnation & death. &, except for the atoning death of Jesus, there's no hope or cleansing for us. There's nothing we can do to cleanse & heal ourselves. We must cast ourselves on His mercy. He is the gospel. He is our hope. What a radical picture of His grace. He doesn't stand at a distance but by His grace, He reaches out to us & touches our dark disease of sin. By His grace, He also makes what is broken & diseased clean & new again. This same Servant-Savior, Jesus, has **compassion** for your leprosy ridden heart. He does more than understand. He felt the full weight of your sins on the cross. Be encouraged by this. There's Someone who compassionately feels with you for the effects of sin in your life. Don't miss the power of Jesus' words, **I am willing; be cleansed**. By the word of His power, He healed a disease for which there was no cure, one of the most dreaded conditions of the ancient world. Can you hear a thundering applause from the multitude? Can you hear the man crying not, *Unclean! Unclean!* but, *I'm clean! I'm clean!* That's what Jesus can do for you & for everyone in an instant. The healing of Jesus in salvation from sin is *instantaneous & complete* because **the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin** (1 Jn 1:7). By doing this Jesus validated the fact that He truly is who He claimed to be: the messianic King, the Son of God, the suffering Servant, & the Savior of the world. Each miracle of His demonstrated His supernatural authority, whether over nature, Satan, disease, sin, or death. His miracles authenticated the truthfulness of His claim & message. The priority in His ministry wasn't performing miracles but preaching the gospel (Mark 1:38). He came to call sinners to repentance & saving faith (1:15).

Let's talk about miracles for a minute. Miracles aren't found everywhere in the Bible. They were never the ordinary experience in biblical times. The overwhelming majority of people never saw a miracle. Miracles are concentrated in 3 historical time periods. The 1st is during the time of the Exodus, the wilderness, & entering the Promised Land; the 2nd is during the ministry of Elijah & Elisha; & the 3rd is the ministry of Jesus & His apostles. By the end of the Epistles there doesn't seem to be miracles like this occurring. Paul's later writings, for example, make no mention of them. At one time simply to touch a handkerchief that Paul had touched would heal the sick (Acts 19:11). But at the end of his life, we hear the sigh of a man who was missing a friend who was ill. **Trophimus I left sick at Miletus** (2 Tim 4:20). It seems the time of miracles was past, even for Paul. Miracles in the Bible are always associated with the prophets, Jesus, & the apostles. The Bible never teaches us to expect we should witness miracles, much less be able to perform them. Likewise, does Jesus want everybody to be healthy? It's a question we sometimes wrestle with, isn't it? Does Jesus want me to be well? Do I have the right to good health? It fascinates me and then it annoys me when preachers say healing is part of the promise of the atonement and of the gospel. They'll stand there and preach, *Jesus doesn't want you to be sick*, and yet they're wearing glasses and have fillings in their teeth and wrinkles in their skin and their hair is falling out and they're aging before you. Actually, they're dying before you, because we're all dying. It's a silly doctrine & unbiblical. If you carry it to its natural conclusion, none of us would ever die because Jesus would always be healing us. Don't fall for it! OK, I'm getting off my soapbox. What were Jesus' miracles for? When Jesus' ministry was complete & He'd returned to heaven, Peter tells us what His miracles were for. In his sermon on Pentecost he says to the Jews that **Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles & wonders & signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know** (Acts 2:22). The purpose of Jesus' miracles wasn't merely to make sick people well. It was to reveal Jesus as the Son of God & the Savior of the world. Miracles & revelation always go together in the Bible. Jesus makes the same point. He pointed out that there were many widows in Elijah's day, but he miraculously provided for only one & she wasn't even Jewish. & there were many lepers in Israel in Elisha's day & he cleansed only one & he wasn't

an Israelite either (Lk 4:25-27). The role of miracles was to accredit those who speak & act for God. If such miracles were happening today, you'd read about it on the front page of paper & see it on primetime news. But we don't & the world laughs & rolls its eyes at the miraculous claims often made by some today. But nobody did when they saw the miracles of Jesus of Nazareth. They were instantaneous & complete.

Back to the text. Jesus gives this man 2 commands. **44**

See that you say nothing to anyone is the 1st command & we've seen Jesus make it before. He says, *Don't tell anyone*. Jesus isn't so much trying to keep His power a secret as trying to stay true to His mission. The reason He came was to preach the gospel of the good news of the kingdom. He won't just be a healer; He won't function as peoples' miracle-worker because His mission is salvation. Everywhere Jesus went, people misunderstood His mission & what He came to do. They were waiting for a champion who would deliver them from Rome, not for the suffering Servant of God who'd deliver them from their sins. Jesus was wary to make public His true identity, especially early in His ministry. Not only that, if this leper went out & told everyone that he'd just been cleansed by Jesus of Nazareth, every leper who heard would rush to Jesus & He wouldn't have time to do the mission He'd been called to do.⁵ The 2nd command was, **go, show yourself to the priest & offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded 44.**

Before resuming his place in society, this man needed to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic law regarding skin diseases as outlined in Lev 14 & Jesus tells him to do so. This required taking 2 birds & killing one of them over running water. The other bird, along with cedar wood, a scarlet string, & hyssop, was then dipped in the blood of the bird that had been slain. The former leper was sprinkled 7x & pronounced clean by the priest, & the live bird was set free in an open field. The person was then required to wash his clothes, shave off his hair, & bathe himself in water. After remaining outside his tent for 7 days, he'd bring appropriate offerings to the priest on the 8th day. Then, upon offering the needed sacrifices (Lev 14:10-11), he'd be anointed with oil by the priest,

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, First Edition, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, pp 34–35

signifying he was clean.⁶ Jesus tells him, *I want you to obey the law. I want you to go & show yourself to the priest. I want you to make the offering that Moses required.* Jesus is submitting to those laws, demonstrating He didn't come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17). Then Jesus says something interesting. He's to do this **as a testimony to them** (44). Who is **them**? The priests the man is to report to. Jesus is confronting the priests with His power. He wants them to see this man who's been cleansed. This is Jesus confronting the religious rulers of His day with His power & His authority. When the priests hear it was Jesus who'd completely & instantly cured this man, they'll have received an overwhelming testimony to Jesus' power & love. They'll also know that even though Jesus condemns human traditions, He doesn't disobey the law. If the priests agree that healing has taken place & accept the sacrifice for cleansing but fail to recognize the Person & power through whom the healing has come, they'll stand condemned by the evidence they themselves have given. The healing of the leper demonstrated that God had done something new. If they neglect this or deliberately refer this gracious act to an evil origin, they condemn themselves. It was important that the man comply with Jesus' instruction. It was necessary on his own behalf, but more important, he was to provide evidence of what God was doing to the priests. Jesus wants this man to go, comply with the Law, so he can be brought back into social interaction. He can be declared clean by the priest, & be part of society once again.

3. The Reaction of the Leper In vs 40 we saw the leper at his best. Now in vs 45, we see him at his worst. After this man has been so mercifully cleansed by Christ, what does he do? **45a**

This is a shocking moment of unthankfulness, selfishness, & disobedience. Immediately upon the command of the One who's given life back to this man, he goes & does exactly the thing Jesus asked him not to do. What a picture of our own selfish, disobedient, & rebellious hearts. How often do we disobey the One who's give us life, not just physical but everlasting life? Whether the man followed the prescribed rite of cleansing we aren't told, but I'm sure he must have. What we are told is that he broke Jesus' command. **He went out & began to proclaim it freely & to spread the news around.**

⁶ John MacArthur, *Mark 1-8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 91

4. The Results for the Lord (45b) Jesus has cleansed the leper of his burden, but in broadcasting the news the leper imposes a burden on Jesus, for **Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas**. The 1st-century Jewish historian Josephus said there were about 240 towns & villages in Galilee. Jesus wanted to go to all of them in order to preach the gospel (Mk 1:38–39). The increasingly overwhelming response of the people made that impossible. The crowds had become so large & demanding that Jesus couldn't publicly enter a town. Therefore, He began to minister in isolated areas, whether in the wilderness or by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Whenever He ventured back into places like Capernaum, the crushing crowds were waiting for Him (Mk 2:2) & He was compelled to retreat to less populated areas (2:13). Jesus knew His popularity was the result of superficial & fleeting desires & expectations (Jn 2:24–25). The crowds got excited about His healing & His miracles, but they were largely uninterested in the message of the gospel (Jn 6:66), a reality that would ultimately conclude with His crucifixion, as they turned on Him in spite of His miracles. Even when Jesus stayed away from the towns & villages of Galilee, the people didn't stay away from Him. In fact, **they were coming to Him from everywhere**. Though He remained in the wilderness, the demanding crowds sought Him out & followed Him wherever He went. The consequences of this man's disobedience were severe. Look what it says at the end of verse 45, that because this man had disobeyed Christ & had spoken widely & freely about what had happened to him, Jesus wasn't able to enter the villages & do what He was there to do, to preach the gospel. Jesus was driven into a desolate place, & people were coming from every corner to Him. The gospel message is interrupted because of this man's disobedience.

Mark began this story with the leper being on the outside. At the end of the story, Jesus is the One outside. Jesus & the leper have traded places. This serves as a powerful analogy to the truth of salvation, illustrating the spiritual life sinners experience when they respond in faith to the gospel. On one hand, the leper was an outcast who was forced to stay in isolated places. But he ventured into society, met Jesus, & was miraculously healed. On the other hand Jesus, who was initially in the city, after healing the leper, relocated to the isolated places. In order to heal this man of his leprosy, the Lord had to trade places with him. In love & by His saving power Jesus exchanged

places with that leper. The leper came home & was restored to his family & normal life. Jesus took his place away from people. He had to be there because the work He came to do for us required it. He had to exchange a comfortable life for a difficult one; He had to keep Himself out of the way of people as much as He could because He still had more than 2 years of ministry yet to perform before going to the cross for us & our salvation. He couldn't allow His work to be short-circuited by the misunderstanding of the people & by false responses to Him that would then be reported to the religious authorities. He couldn't go to His death before the appointed time. So He took the leper's place in the lonely places as He'd eventually take the leper's place on the cross. Our Savior was willing to become an outsider so that an untouchable leper could be rescued & restored. This is a picture of the reality of the gospel, Jesus traded places with sinners in order to deliver us from sin. On the cross, outside the city, Jesus was treated as an outcast so that those who truly were outcasts might be reconciled to God & accepted as citizens of His kingdom. Now that Jesus has been to the cross, died & risen again, & been raised to the right hand of the Father, we are charged, not to be silent, but with telling one & all about Jesus. I pray that people today will come to Him from everywhere to hear His message that God has come into the world & is born to us as a Savior, who is Christ, our Lord. The account of this leper provides a wonderful metaphor for what Jesus did at the cross. As sinners, we were once spiritual lepers who lived in alienation & isolation from God. God provided a way of salvation for us through His Son, Jesus Christ. In order to accomplish that plan of redemption, the Son left the presence of God & went into isolation. On the cross, Jesus was forsaken. He was rejected by men & even forsaken by His own Father (Mt 27:46). Yet, because He was treated as an outcast, believers have been accepted & welcomed into the presence of God. It was on account of our sin that He suffered. Yet, for those who come to Him in humble faith, recognizing their own unworthiness & asking for mercy, He offers full cleansing. We're all lepers, just as needy, desperate, helpless, & hopeless in ourselves as was this leper who came to Jesus begging for a cure. We're unclean before God & unable to make ourselves clean. But what the leper found in Jesus was the purest sympathy & compassion matched with unlimited power. & that's what we still find in Jesus today. Jesus can & certainly does still deliver people from disease

at His good pleasure, but His far greater work is to cleanse our lives of sin, a greater gift, a greater deliverance, a greater wonder requiring far greater power than even the sudden, immediate, & complete cure of a leper.

We'd all probably love to see a miracle. But it's far better to walk with Jesus daily & have His almighty power at work in our lives securing for us not a healthy body but a clean soul for the world to come. If you realize that the leprosy of sin has infected you & you have no doubt you're a sinner, there's no reason why you shouldn't run immediately to Jesus. He has compassion, He feels for you. He'll actually *touch* your leprosy. He will take hold of it. Even better, you'll be immediately healed. This account we've looked at today is a picture of us all. We're all disfigured by sin, unable to heal ourselves. Our only hope is in the compassion of Jesus where He becomes sin for us so that we might have His righteousness (2 Cor 5:21).

I want to close by reading the same passage we began the service with. It's a hymn of celebration in Rev 5: **Worthy are You, Jesus, to take the book & to break its seals; for You were slain, & purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe & tongue & people & nation. You have made them *to be* a kingdom & priests to our God; & they will reign upon the earth (9-10).** There will be a day when all people who've been redeemed & cleansed by the blood of Christ will together celebrate for eternity His grace. Are you looking forward to that day? The powerful & the powerless, the rich & the poor, the leprous & the healthy, the accepted & the despised, names that are known & names that are unknown, all together singing praise to God. Together we'll recognize the one hope that's opened the door to eternity, the cleansing blood of the Lamb of God & we will together sing that hymn forever.