

Moved with Compassion

A Sermon on Mark 1:40-45

Preached by Paul Liberati, March 21, 2021

Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, I am willing; be cleansed – Mark 1:41

Congregation, this morning we have an opportunity to consider, once again, the greatness of Jesus Christ. Only, this time it's not so much the greatness of his *wisdom* or *power*, but the focal point is on his *compassion* for those who are suffering in their affliction.

On this occasion, Jesus is approached by a leprous man and he heals him just like he's done for so many before. Then, he instructs this man according to the Law of God, commanding him to offer the sacrifices of cleansing that Moses required. But of all the things in our text, the two that really stand out in terms of the details that Mark provides, are the *motive* and the *manner* of our Lord's healing. When it comes to the motive, Mark says that Jesus was *moved with compassion*. Then, the manner is described in verse 41, where it says, and he stretched out His hand *and touched him*.

Now, in order for us to appreciate why both of those details are so important, we need to think about the situation of the man who came to Jesus on this day. In verse 40 Mark says that this man was a *leper*. But that raises a question: What is leprosy, and how does that factor into the details of our text?

Leprosy and its Effects

Well, first of all, leprosy in the Old Testament was a catch-all term; a category for virtually every kind of skin disease—including everything from psoriasis, to lupus, to ringworm, as well as what we call today, Hansen's Disease, which we know causes severe disfiguring skin sores, nerve damage, deadening of the tissue, and many times leads to the need for

amputating limbs. And so Leprosy, is a term that describes different infectious diseases of the skin, and yet leprosy in general was talked about as a disease of its own, and regulated according to its worst possible cases.

In Leviticus chapters 13 and 14, there were extensive laws and regulations for dealing with this disease. And the reason is that leprosy didn't just make a person physically sick and disabled, but also, it constituted the infected person *ceremonially unclean*. There was something of a socio-religious dynamic at play here, and it made living with this condition one of the most difficult things to endure. The social ramifications for being diagnosed with leprosy were devastating to say the least.

In Leviticus 13, we see that there were two factors that contributed to this. On the one hand you had the factor of *contamination*, because leprosy was regarded as a highly contagious disease. Not only does it start off small, and eventually spread throughout one's body, ultimately infecting the whole person, but even more than that, leprosy could also spread from person to person if not properly contained. And, because of that, the regulations were very strict.

In fact, if a person was diagnosed, there were a number of things he had to do. In verse 45 it says that he was to *tear his clothes*. He had to *shave his head*. And worst of all, everytime he came anywhere near a public place, he had to cover his own mouth and cry out to the approaching people, *Unclean! Unclean!* You can see from this, why, when the ten lepers came to Jesus in Luke 17, the Bible says that *they stood afar off*. Luke says they *lifted up their voices*, and cried to Jesus from a distance, begging him to have mercy on them. Those men knew that they couldn't come close to the Lord, being contaminated with this disease.

The other factor at play here, which is really just an extension of the first, is the factor of *isolation*. Here, it's not just that the leper had to keep his distance from people in public places, but also even his own home was moved outside the camp. In Leviticus 13:46, we read, *All the days he has the sore he shall be unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp*.

The isolation factor was extremely difficult to bear. The fact that they had to live alone means that they were separated from their own families. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, all separated for contracting leprosy.

Leprosy Pictures Sin

Now, commentators have long understood the symbolism at work here, and that's not to say that none of this was real. This was very real, and there were leper camps all throughout the ancient world to testify to the sad historical reality of this disease. But, it is to say that there's something of a connection here between the *effects* of leprosy and the *effects* of human sin.

Just like leprosy, sin can start off small and seemingly insignificant. But when it's not dealt with, it can grow and spread throughout your entire life. In fact, the Bible makes this connection in different ways. One example is found in Isaiah 1, where the LORD is dealing with the rebellion of his people. He refers to them as a "sinful nation" and "a people laden with iniquity." In verse 5, he says they were so bad that to punish them would only make them worse. And it's here, when He wants to show the thoroughness of their corruption that He borrows from the imagery of a leper, whose body was covered in sores.

Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed; they have not been bound up, or soothed with ointment.

Sin is just like leprosy because first of all, it has a *contaminating* effect. Sin is not just something that spreads throughout your own life, but it's also something that spreads from person to person, and therefore calls for separation on every level. By extension then, sin *isolates* us from each other; it separates even the closest relationships we have in this world. More importantly, sin separates us from God.

In Isaiah 59:1-2, the prophet says, *Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.* In other words, so

long as we cling to our own ways and refuse to confess our sins, God will never hear us, no matter how loud we cry. That's because the sin that we love so much can only separate us from a just and holy God.

There is Good News in Jesus

But there's good news in all of this as well. It is true that leprosy is a fitting picture of sin. But that's not only because of its contaminating and isolating effects; it's also a great picture of sin because the only way a leprosy man could ever be cleansed was by the power of God Himself. You see, no leper could heal himself. Only God could do that. And once he was healed, no leper could pronounce himself clean. In that case, only the priest could do that. So, as you think about that, you realize what a wonderful lesson we have in our text.

In our text, this leprosy man comes to Jesus knowing that he's the only one who can take away his disease; he's the only one who can heal his broken life and restore the fellowship that he lost with the people of God as well as God Himself. And Jesus, as the Son of God, and the Great High Priest of his people, has the ability to truly cleanse and then truly and authoritatively pronounce this man clean.

The very fact that he comes to Jesus (and Mark says that he *kneels down before him*) is a testimony to his faith. This man believes that Jesus has the power to do what no mere man can do. The only question that remains uncertain, however, is whether or not Jesus is willing to heal. And, you can see that this is what the man is thinking because, in verse 40, he says, You can make me clean, *if you are willing*.

The Willingness of Jesus

One of the things we talked about last week, in our Q&A session after lunch, was the relationship between our prayers and the sovereignty of God. The question was: How can I pray with confidence knowing that God is sovereign, and that He does only what He's already purposed to do. After all, the Bible says that His plan was made *according to the good pleasure of His own will*, right?

And you know, it's very possible that some of that same reasoning was there in the heart of this leprous man. After all, God knew about his condition and not just that he *had* it. But if God is sovereign, and leprosy is a picture of sin, then didn't that indicate he was living under the curse and wrath of God? So then, what would make this man think that, even if the Son of God could heal him, that he would ultimately be *willing* to do so?

Well, again, I think the answer is that, in the Bible, you and I are directed not to the secret purpose of God but to the promises that He gives us in His word. When we look at the promises of God, we hear that God will never turn away the one who comes to Him in faith. In fact, Jesus makes the very promise in John 6 when he says, All that the Father gives me will come to me, *and the one who comes to me I will in no wise cast out.*

Congregation, I believe if we focus less on trying to figure out the secret things, and focus more on the promises revealed in the word of God, you and I would think, pray, and live in a totally different way. If we would just remember that Jesus *commands* us, saying, Ask and it *will be given*, seek and you *will find*, and knock and it *will be opened to you* — all of us would experience a lot more of God's grace and blessings than we've experienced in the past.

You know why? Because Jesus goes on to say, *For everyone who asks, receives. And everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks at the door, the door is opened.*

Now, as encouraging as that is, I recognize the stronghold of unbelief. And so it's possible that many here today are hearing these words and still wondering if we can take these promises to the bank. Well, in our text the Lord is showing us that we can.

Jesus, Moved with Compassion

Here's this leprous man. He's an outcast from all society. He's been properly diagnosed and pronounced *unclean*. He's been separated from the people of God and those of his own family. And yet, even though his heart and mind are filled with shame, fear, and doubts, this man had at least enough faith to come to Jesus Christ. He had at least enough faith to present himself, and timidly knock at the door— hoping in the mercy of God. And you know, a beautiful thing happened that day because, in the end, he was not disappointed.

When he said to Jesus, You can heal me *if you are willing*, Mark says that Jesus was *moved with compassion*, and he put out his hand, and he touched him, saying *I am willing, be cleansed!*

It's always interesting to see how Jesus heals people in the Bible. There's no question that Jesus can heal without a tool or an instrument, or even a spoken word. If you think about the woman who touched the hem of his garment, Jesus didn't say a single thing and that woman was made completely whole. So, all that's necessary is for Jesus to be willing to heal, and he can unleash all the power necessary to get the job done.

But that raises an interesting point. When Jesus takes various actions in the process of healing, there must be some reason for doing so—other than that he simply *has* to. In the case of the blind man, Jesus put mud on his eyes. Why did he do that? I would venture to say that he was giving us a picture of re-creation. Just like man was formed from the dust of the ground, so now, this man was being re-formed and re-created by the very hand of Jesus Christ. God was restoring him to his original design!

Likewise, when Jesus healed the deaf man, he put his fingers in the man's ears. And, interestingly, as he stood there face to face with the man, the Bible says, And Jesus *lifted up his eyes*. And so we ask again: Why did he do that? Here, I imagine Jesus was reminding this man of where his help and healing were coming from. Just think about Psalm 121:1, *I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from where my help comes. My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth*. The man was deaf and couldn't hear any words. So, on that occasion, Jesus communicated with his eyes!

So, there's always a reason for the actions Jesus takes in the process of healing men. There's always a message to be found in the details of what he does. Sometimes it's a message of deep theological truth, other times it's a message of practical faith and trust, and other times it's a message that simply says to the person, *I love you and care for you, and I'm not ashamed to receive you to myself*.

Well, certainly, that's the case with the healing in our text. And, I say that because Mark tells us that the leprosy left the man, specifically, when Jesus spoke the word. And yet, right

there in conjunction with what he said, Mark is very careful to tell us what he did. Jesus reached out and with his own hand made *personal contact with this leprous man*.

For many years, this man had been separated from all human contact, and in his soul felt the pain of being separated from the grace of God itself. But now, this one who was untouchable is touched by Jesus Christ.

There's no question that we have a clear and powerful message of the love and mercy of Christ, and the *acceptance* that we have with God through him. When Jesus touched this man he was telling him that he no longer had to live like an outcast. No longer did he have to think of himself as less than a child of God, as less than a man who was made (and now re-made) in the image of God.

And, as you think about that, you realize that everything in the “message” of the Lord's touch also applies to you. The truth is that if you're trusting in the finished work of Jesus, it's only because, at some point in your life, Jesus reached out and touched you as well. And with that touch, he gave you the same message that he gave this man.

In Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul says that we “who sometimes were afar off, were made near by the blood of Christ.” He tells us that now, “we are no longer aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” and “stranger from the covenants of promise.” He assures us that on the basis of the grace of Jesus Christ, you and I are “now fellow-citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God.” So yes, the message is the same. And the message is that, when Jesus reaches out and takes hold of you, he's telling you that you belong to him—both now and forever more!

A Right Perspective

Now, after he healed this man, Jesus gave him some very specific instructions. He told him first, not to tell anyone what happened, and second, to show himself to the priests and offer the sacrifices that Moses required in the law.

And, it's interesting because, in most of the sermons you hear on this text, the preacher stands up and ridicules the man for his total disobedience of the Lord's command. And, of

course, their right that the man disobeyed, because in verse 45 Mark says that despite what the Lord said: *the man went out and began to proclaim it freely*. And so yes, the man here is doing what the Lord told him *not* to do.

But before we get all worked up and condemn this man for sinning against the Lord, you and I need to put things in perspective. And, we can do that by comparing his disobedience back then, with our disobedience today.

J. Vernon McGee, the late radio preacher and host of the Bible Bus program, once commented on this verse. He reminds us that when we make the right application here, we're all left standing like the Pharisees with rocks in their hands, none of whom wanted to cast the first stone. And his point was well-made. He said: *The Lord told this man to tell no-one and he told everyone. Today, the Lord tells you to tell everyone, and you tell no one.*

Now, let me just say, this doesn't mean that we're defending this man's sin just because we recognize that we're in no position to judge him. All we're doing is putting things in the right perspective so that we don't hear the stinging rebuke of Jesus that, before we try to take the *speck* out of our brother's eye, we must remove the *log* from our own!

A Gracious Testimony

In closing, I want to look at the *purpose* of Jesus in sending the man to the priests. In verse 44, he says that the reason for doing that was to give *a testimony to them*. And here, some commentators point out that it's possible Jesus is saying that the testimony was not to them but *against* them because the grammar can go either way.

Well, I don't think we need to put a negative spin on the Lord's purpose. I think the best explanation is that Jesus was simply sending this man as a witness to the fact that the Kingdom of God had finally come. I think Jesus is doing for the priests the very same thing he did for John the Baptist when he was struggling in his faith.

When John was in prison, he began to question whether Jesus was really the Messiah. So he sent two of his disciples to the Lord and asked: *Are you the one, or should we be looking for another?* On that occasion, Jesus told the disciples to go back and tell John all the things

that they heard and saw—namely, *that the blind see and the lame walk, the deaf hear and the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised up and the gospel preached to the poor.*”

The very fact that Jesus was performing all these miracles, was a testimony that he was in fact the Messiah. And, the truth is that, of all these mighty works in the list that Jesus gives, cleansing lepers was considered to be the most difficult and unusual of all. In fact, there’s a tractate in the Jewish *Mishnah* that deals with lepers, and it shows that the ancient rabbis often said: *It is easier to raise the dead than it is to cleanse a leper.*

So then, by sending these reports to John the Baptist and here to the priests in our text, Jesus was simply providing them with everything they needed to put their trust in him.

And, Congregation, as we go our way today, we need to keep in mind that the same thing is true for us. Jesus, in this great miracle is giving us a testimony as well. His purpose is that you and I would learn to trust him for who he is.

For as the apostle John says, at the very end of his Gospel: *And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. Amen.*