

INTRODUCTION

For the past six weeks we counted down the last 94 hours of the life of Jesus before the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning. In this message I'm going to resume my verse-by-verse study of the Gospel According to Mark. This series is entitled, "The reMARKable Power of Jesus." In this message we're going to discuss "The Healing Touch of Jesus."

I can recall when I was growing up there was a TV show called "The Untouchables." At the time, I had no clue who or what was "untouchable" in the show. I just know that when my dad was watching it, the channel dial (no remote) was "untouchable" for any of us kids! I later learned the show was about Elliot Ness, an FBI agent in the 1920s, who brought down Al Capone and other mobsters who were considered to be "untouchable" by the law.

In this message, we are going to see Jesus dealt with "untouchables" long before Elliot Ness came on the scene. Jesus did something nobody else was willing to do at the time. He was willing to reach out and touch those people who were physically and ceremonially unclean.

Mark 1:35-45. "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.' So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.' Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere."

When you walk through the Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, you'll see statues of famous people from all 50 states. There are two statues from Hawaii. One statue is King Kamehameha. The other is a statue honoring a priest known as Father Damien. When Europeans first came to the beautiful islands, one of the worst things they brought were diseases, including leprosy. Leprosy, or Hansen's disease, was particularly virulent among the Hawaiians. Those who were severely deformed by the disease were isolated to a remote peninsula on the island of Molokai. The colony was a cesspool of suffering and sickness. But a young Catholic priest, Father Damien, volunteered to go to the island and serve the lepers. He was warned to keep himself isolated from the lepers, but he couldn't do that. He soon contracted the disease. During his first sermon after the diagnosis he said, "We lepers..." He lived and ministered among the lepers for 16 years until he died from the disease at age 49. Before he died he built a modern hospital and improved the lives of the lepers.

Father Damien lived among the lepers and took their illness. That reminds me of what Jesus did. He came to planet earth as a pure, sinless man. He lived among us and literally became sin for us. There's an old hymn that says, "He took my sins and my sorrows, He made them His very own; he bore the burden to Calvary, and suffered and died alone." ("I Stand Amazed in the Presence," Charles H. Gabriel, *The Baptist Hymnal*, 1991)

As I often say, there's a parable in every miracle and a miracle in every parable. What is the parable we can learn from this healing miracle?

I. WE ALL SUFFER FROM A CONDITION THAT DEFILES US

In Bible times, leprosy was a terrible disease. Leprosy was a skin disease that gradually disfigured a person until they were considered defiled. Leprosy killed healthy skin tissue and destroyed nerve endings.

According to a prominent dermatologist, Dr. Jennifer Holman, who just happens to be my daughter, here's what we know about leprosy today: "Leprosy is an infection caused by a mycobacterium. Since it is treatable, we see a lot less of it these days. The infection responds to several antibiotics for six to twelve months. Interestingly, they have found DNA that showed leprosy from tombs in Jerusalem that date back to the time of Jesus."

Leprosy was a disease that not only affected a person physically, but it defiled them religiously. Leviticus 13:45-46 says, "The person with such infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp." Thankfully, none of us are suffering from the skin disease called leprosy, but we are all defiled by an inner sickness that disfigures and defiles God's creation. This condition is called sin. In the Bible, there is a connection between sin and leprosy. In his pride, King Uzziah decided to enter the temple and go where only the priests could go—he was the king, after all. The Bible says God struck him with leprosy for this sin. When you think about leprosy and sin there are three parallels.

A. Sin starts small but grows

Nobody wakes up and has a full-blown case of leprosy. According to Leviticus, leprosy began with just a small spot on the skin. It then spread to other areas of the body. Only after 14 days of examination could a priest declare a person indeed had leprosy. Once leprosy was diagnosed, the disease spread rapidly.

Our sin sickness operates the same way. Although we are born with a tendency to sin, our first sins are usually what we would call minor. However, unless we allow Jesus to fix our sin problem early in life, sin grows and spreads like a metastasis until it consumes us. The growth of sin in a person's life can sometimes happen so slowly that they don't even notice it.

Perhaps you've heard of the proverbial "frog in the kettle." If you put a frog in boiling hot water, the frog will immediately try to escape. However if you put a frog in warm water and slowly and

gradually increase the temperature, the frog will stay in the hot water until it dies. (That's what I've heard; I don't plan on testing the theory.)

One tragic symptom of leprosy is that it deadens the nerve endings. People with leprosy often lose their finger and toes because they can no longer feel pain. If you touch a hot stove, your nerve endings send a quick panic message to your brain, "Remove your finger." Lepers run the risk of having their fingers or toes crushed or burned because the nerve endings can't send warning signals to the brain if there is pain present. Sin does exactly the same thing. A person who consumed with sin becomes desensitized to the warning signals of their moral conscience. It is hard for us to understand how certain people can commit terrible sins or crimes and seem to have no remorse. What has happened? Their moral conscience has lost any feeling it once had.

B. Sin isolates us from God's blessing

One of the most tragic things about leprosy was that infected persons were not allowed to be with their families. They were thrown out of their homes and town and had to live alone. But often lepers lived together: misery loves its own company.

To make matters worse, they were also considered ceremonially unclean. This meant they were excluded from any spiritual blessings or activities. Blindness was another common symptom of leprosy that increased this helpless feeling of isolation. Because lepers cannot "feel" with their hands, they are not able to function like other blind people. The disease caused them to have a terrible sense of isolation. They felt, alone, despised, rejected and hopeless.

How tragic! That is exactly what sin does. It isolates a person from the blessings of God. In Isaiah 59:2 we read, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." If you ever have the sense that God seems "far away" the very first place you need to look is to see if there is sin in your life. Sin separates a person from God.

C. Left unchecked, sin leads to death

While leprosy itself was not actually terminal, in the times of Jesus, people usually died from the complications associated with it. In the Talmud, there was a rabbinical prayer that was prayed over a person who was found to have leprosy. It was not a prayer of healing; it was more like a funeral prayer. A leper was considered dead from the moment they were declared to be unclean.

That is an accurate description of sin as well. The Bible says sin always leads to death. "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:14-15)

Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death." A person with leprosy was still breathing, walking around, eating, and talking. But he was considered the walking dead. A person without Jesus is already dead, even though they are walking around, breathing, eating, and talking. Paul confirms this by these words he wrote to Christians in Ephesus: "As for you, you were dead in

your transgressions and sins..." (Ephesians 2:1) He didn't say they were going to die in the sins; he said they were already dead.

So as bad as leprosy is to the body, all of us suffer from a much more dangerous affliction to our soul—sin. What can we do about it?

II. OUR ONLY HOPE IS TO SEEK JESUS FOR A CURE

This leper did a courageous thing. He heard about Jesus so he fought through the crowd to find Him. He fell on his face and begged Jesus to heal him. Without a doubt, that was the most important decision this man ever made. He found himself in a hopeless and helpless condition yet he didn't give up hope. He sought the right source for help. This leper demonstrated two qualities necessary if we want Jesus to change us.

A. We must approach Jesus in humility

The Bible says the leper fell on his knees before Jesus and begged Him for help. He didn't just walk up and demand to know why he was so unlucky or so unblessed to be a leper. If you truly want to seek Jesus, you must be willing to fall on your face before Him. The Bible says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5) I am convinced the reason some people will never be saved is because they are too proud to even admit they need help. They deny they have a problem. It would have been like that man looking at himself and saying, "Leprosy? No, it's just a minor skin irritation. You should see some of the people down in the leper colony, I'm a lot better off than they are!" The attitude of most people in America is, "Sinner? Not me. I'm no worse than anybody else around me. In fact, I'm better than some of those folks who go down to your church."

Or some admit they have a problem but they think they can fix it themselves. Can't you just hear the leper saying, "Yeah, I've got a problem, but I am using this new herbal ointment my brother told me about. I am going to clean up this leprosy with my own medicine." After all doesn't the Bible say, "God helps those who help themselves?" 82% of Americans think that's in the Bible. But NO, that's not in the Bible.

The leper in our story didn't believe God helps those who help themselves. He realized he couldn't help himself! That's why he threw himself on his face before Jesus and begged for help. The truth is: God helps the helpless—when they come to Him in humility and beg Him to help.

B. We must approach Jesus in faith

He said to Jesus, "If you are willing, I know that you can make me clean." Before Jesus can change you, you must believe Jesus can heal you. We need to study that statement for a moment. I've heard people, who are often called "faith preachers" get very picky when they talk about how to pray. They say, "Don't ever use the word 'IF' when you pray, it shows a lack of faith." They will warn you to never pray, "Lord, IF it is your will."

Our poor leper must not have heard some of our modern faith preachers or read some of the books on faith. If he had, he would have approached Jesus and said, "I know you will heal me so go ahead, I claim what's mine!" Ouch. You can't handcuff God to His Word and use it as some magical incantation. It's not about reciting the correct formula and demanding that God respond the way you desire. Simple faith is just that: simple. It says, "God I believe you can but I am not going to presume upon your will. This is what I desire but only if You are willing."

Do you have a need? Tell God you are absolutely certain He can meet your need. Express to the Lord the only issue is His willingness to do so. Fall before Him in humility and ask Him to help you. That is how faith operates.

Here's the final message of this amazing miracle.

III. THE TOUCH OF JESUS CHANGES US FOREVER

Jesus said three things to the leper. These are the same thing He says to those who seek His touch today.

A. "I am willing!" Jesus shows compassion to those who seek Him

Jesus recognized faith and responded with great feeling. There were thousands of lepers in Israel, but at this time the only one who was seeking Jesus was this man. Later ten lepers came to Jesus and He healed them.

God is willing for everyone to be saved, but only those who seek Him receive His compassion. The Bible says in 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." According to this verse is it God's will that every person be saved? Yes. Is everyone going to be saved? No. You may think, "I thought God's will was always done." Not necessarily. For God's will to be done, our will must agree with His. It was God's will for me to be saved but then my will came into agreement with His when I was 9 years old. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We must pray for it to happen, and we must obey God so that His will may happen.

B. "Be clean!" Jesus touches us at the point of our need

The most amazing thing about this story appears in verse 13 where it says, "Jesus reached out his hand and touched him..." Jews were forbidden to touch lepers. To touch a leper would make that person ceremonially unclean. Kosher Jews were not even allowed to breathe the same air; that's why lepers had to cover the bottoms of their faces. Everywhere they went they had to cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" This was a warning so clean Jews could avoid them. The Talmud stated that a leper could not get within six feet of a "clean person."

Try to imagine this scene: Jesus is walking along when suddenly a leper breaks through the crowd and falls before Him begging Jesus to heal him. I can hear as the other members of the crowd gasp in horror. They cover their mouths and turn away from this leper who has broken the

law and approached Jesus. Then Jesus shocks the crowd. He reaches out touches him. Not as a doctor who is examining a patient, but he reaches out in compassion and touches him with healing power. He touches the untouchable. I love that scene don't you? Nobody else will touch this poor man. How long do you think it had been since he had been hugged or touched by another human? He was hungry for any human touch, and Jesus touches him with love and healing.

Lepers were the untouchables of Jesus' time. Who are the untouchables in our culture? The homeless? The prison inmates? Those who suffer with mental illness? Just as Jesus reached out to touch them in love, so should we. You may be reading this or hearing this and you may consider yourself an untouchable. But if you will cry out to Jesus, He will enfold you in His arms of love and embrace you with His grace.

You may be thinking, "I'm too sick, too vile, too sinful, too far gone for Jesus to help me. I'll clean up my act first, then I'll come to Jesus." It's a good thing that this leper didn't wait until He was clean to beg Jesus for a touch. He would have died first. And if you're waiting to clean up your act before you come to Jesus, you will die in your sins as well. That's why we sing, "Just as I am, and waiting not; to rid my soul of one dark blot; To thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot; Oh, Lamb of God I come!" (words by Charlotte Elliott)

C. "Go show!" If you've been touched, you can't help but testify!

There were two reasons why Jesus told the healed leper to go show himself to a priest. First, this action would remove the stigma of being a religious and social outcast. The second reason was for the priests to see proof of His power. Jesus said, "Go show yourself to the priests as a testimony to them." This man was the first leper healed since the time of Elisha. Jesus wanted to shake up the religious professionals.

But why did he tell the man not to spread the news to anyone else? At this point, early in His ministry Jesus didn't want the crowds to follow him as if He were a medical miracle man. He didn't come primarily to heal; He came to announce God's Kingdom and to die on a cross. But Jesus also knew the man couldn't keep his mouth closed.

Here's the irony. Jesus told this man to keep quiet and he told everyone. And Jesus has told us to tell everyone and we keep quiet. But the truth is, if you've been touched, you will testify. You'll want to tell others.

Have you been touched by Jesus? Have you told anyone? The Bible says, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the Lord say this—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe." (Psalm 107:1-2)

CONCLUSION

There is nothing in the universe that can change us like the touch of Jesus. Back in the 1980s Wayne Watson reworked an old poem by Myra Brooks Welch into a song. It tells a powerful story: Well it was battered and scarred; and the auctioneer felt; it was hardly worth his while. To

waste much time on the old violin; but he held it up with a smile. He said, "It sure ain't much, but it's all we got left; I guess we ought to sell it too. So who's got a bid on this old violin? Just one more and we'll be through." And he called out, "One, give me one dollar. Who'll make it two? Only two dollars? Who'll make it three? Three dollars twice, now that's a good price. Who's got a bid for me? Hold up your hand and don't wait any longer. The auction's about the end. Who's got four? Just one dollar more to bid on this old violin? Well, the air was hot as the people stood around; and the sun was settin' low. From the back of the crowd an old grey haired man stepped forward and picked up the bow. He wiped the dust from the old violin and he tightened up the strings. Then he played out a melody pure and sweet – as sweet as the angels sing. Then the music stopped, and the auctioneer, with a voice that was quiet and low. He said, "NOW what is my bid on this old violin?" And he held it up with the bow. And he cried out, "One give me one thousand; who'll make it two? Only two thousand? Who'll make it three? Three thousand twice, now that's a good price. Now, who's got a bid for me?" The people cried out, "What made the change? We don't understand!" And the auctioneer stopped and he said with a smile, "It was the touch of the Master's hand."

Well, you know, many a person with a life out of tune is battered and scarred by sin. And they're auctioned cheap to a thankless world, much like that old violin. Then Jesus comes and the foolish crowd, they never understand the worth of a soul, and the change that is wrought by the touch of the Master's hand.

OUTLINE

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- C. Left unchecked, sin leads to death

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas*