

INTRODUCTION

I'll never forget the moment when I first realized I had leprosy. I was just getting ready to sit down for supper with my wife, Rachel, and our son Ben. I had worked all day at my baking bread for my regular customers at my bakery. My hands were covered with flour, so I was using the water basin to cleanse my hands according to our Jewish custom. As I grabbed the pitcher with my left hand to pour the water over my right, that's when I noticed the blood in the water. At first I wondered where it came from, and then I realized that was coming from a tear in the skin on the back of my right hand. I couldn't remember cutting myself, and, strangely, I felt no pain. Dear God, no, don't let it be! As I examined my hand, I saw it: the tell-tale rough rash I had seen before from a distance on other lepers.

Trembling, I glanced over my shoulder hoping to shield the horror from Rachel and Ben. But Rachel had her hand over her mouth, her face ashen, and her eyes full of fear. I tried to put on a brave face. I said, "It's probably nothing. But just to be safe, leave now and take Ben and stay the night with your parents. I'll go to the priests tomorrow."

I didn't sleep a wink that night as I itched and scratched through the long hours. I couldn't help but notice my skin was coming off as I scratched the rough places. As soon as the priest saw me he put me into confinement for a week, according to our laws. I was placed in a miserable shack near the city dump where the smell of burning garbage was almost more than I could take. Over the next week, my skin became more inflamed and buckled. Blood was oozing from the pores of my skin. After seven days, the priest returned to examine me. With his face covered he stood at a distance and declared I was permanently unclean—leprosy. Then he prayed a prayer over me, which I thought was an act of kindness, until I realized he was praying a funeral prayer. My Jewish religion considered a person with leprosy to be already dead. I was numb with shock. I cried, "God, why? What did I do to deserve this? I attended synagogue regularly and recited the Shema three times a day. God, couldn't you have just killed me?"

Over the next few years, things went from bad to worse. I was exiled to a leper colony beside the garbage dump where I lived among other lepers. I wasn't allowed to see Rachel or Ben. It was as if I was dead to them. And although I was the most gifted baker in the village, I wasn't allowed to work. I was ceremonially unclean, so I wasn't allowed to pray or read the Torah. I was forbidden to travel to Jerusalem the Holy City. I couldn't get close to the Temple. It was as if I was dead, even though I was alive (if you want to call it life). I lost all feeling in my fingers and toes, so I couldn't tell if I was touching something hot or cold, or even if my fingers were being crushed. I broke several of my fingers, and the only way I knew they were broken was when I could no longer use them. And the rash on my skin spread until my body was covered. The rash developed into open sores, and I wished I had lost my sense of smell instead of my sense of feeling, because the odor was sickening. I was reduced to wearing rags and scrounging for food among the fires and flies of the garbage dump. My only competitors were the other lepers and the wild dogs that appeared every evening. Whenever we approached the dump, we were required to cover the bottom of our faces. If anyone else approached us we had to shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" to warn them. People who had been my good customers at the bakery now ran from me and children who had eaten samples of my sweetbread now recoiled in horror at the sight of me.

It was hell on earth. The pain, the misery, the flies, the smoke, the itching; I would have killed myself many times, but I didn't even have enough courage and strength to do that—and I knew I would be dead soon enough anyway. The worst thing was I woke up every day missing Rachel and Ben. I missed Rachel's touch. I missed Ben running and jumping into my arms when I came home every afternoon. Since I had been declared unclean, not a single person had touched me. I ached for the touch of another human being. I had no hope and no future. I begged God, "Please God, let me die! I can't take this much longer!"

And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse it did. I saw them at a distance. Rachel was walking down the road holding Ben's hand. Ben was taller than when I had last seen him. They were living with her parents, but she had been reduced to begging since I could no longer provide an income for them. They never knew I was watching them, and I doubt they would have recognized me if they saw me. I wanted to run over and take her in my arms and touch her face. I wanted to embrace my son, but I didn't move. I stood there staring with my tears dropping into the dust at my feet. When she saw the group of lepers, she quickened her pace and turned toward the village.

One day at the garbage dump, I heard some other lepers talking about a prophet who was in the area of Galilee. This Jesus was called "the Lamb of God." That sounded so clean and innocent. They said he spoke with compassion and he cast out demons and even healed the sick. Suddenly, something ignited in my heart that had been absent for years: a spark of hope. Maybe he could... But no, there's no way that a Holy Man would even come close to a dirty leper like me. I loaded some scraps of food in the folds of my tattered robe and started the journey toward the lake of Galilee. I traveled at night to avoid people, and after three days, I arrived in the region. As the sun came up, there was no mistaking where Jesus was. There was a crowd gathered on top of a grassy hill beside the sparkling lake and they were strangely quiet. As I approached the edge of the crowd I could hear a clear, strong voice saying something about a wise man building his house on a rock and a foolish man building his house on the sand, and when the storm came, the house on the rock stood firm while the house on the sand collapsed. Then He said a wise person was someone who heard His words and put them into practice. He spoke with such authority that I immediately decided I wanted to believe His words and put them into practice. I remembered the story of Elisha and Naaman. Naaman had leprosy and the prophet had healed him. I wondered, "Can this prophet do for me what Elisha did for Naaman?" There was a stirring in the crowd as Jesus started walking down the hill. The people crowded around Him asking Him questions. I knew it was forbidden for me to approach clean people, but I ducked my head and quickly pushed my way through the crowd. People who saw me shouted, "Unclean! Unclean!" Others threw rocks at me and spat on me as they yelled at me to leave. But my desperation drove me forward.

Suddenly, I was there before Jesus. I threw myself on my knees before Him. The people around me shrank away in horror, but Jesus didn't move. He raised His hand for the crowd to be quiet. I looked up into His eyes. And that's when I knew. I saw in His eyes such compassion and strength that I knew He was the Lord God. He was more than just a prophet; I knew He could do anything. So with my cracked voice I said, "Lord! If you are willing. You can make me clean." I bowed my head in surrender to Him. The hope that had been but a spark roared into life as a

raging flame of certainty. I knew in that moment that whether I was healed or not, I had discovered the source of life and truth. And for the first time in years, I felt peace.

I heard the gasps of horror from the people around me and I looked up just in time to see Jesus reaching out His hand to me. To me! I had been longing for a human touch for so long! I had almost forgotten what it felt like to be touched. I watched His hand as He gently covered my deformed face with His palm. In that moment I realized this wasn't a human touch, it was a Divine touch. He smiled at me and with a twinkle in His eye He said, "I am willing. Be clean."

The crowd gasped again, but this time they were not horrified, they were mystified. In the instant Jesus removed His hand from my face, I felt all of the rotteness, pain, and deformity of my body depart. I raised my hand and I couldn't believe my eyes. The skin was smooth and fresh. I raised my hand to my face where Jesus had just touched me and instead of the horrible sores and buckled flesh, I felt only smooth skin.

Jesus told me to go to the priests and to offer the sacrifice Moses had prescribed. I ran back to my village and found the same priest who had declared me unclean. He was amazed and asked me what had happened. I told them Jesus had touched me and my life was instantly changed. He wasn't happy about this, because the priests were already become jealous of Jesus. But he couldn't argue with the fact that my leprosy had disappeared.

I left the priest and ran as fast as I could to Rachel's parents' house. Out of breath, I burst through the door. Rachel and Ben were sitting at a table with her parents and when they saw me, they were stunned. Then both of them jumped up and ran into my arms. I cannot tell you how good it felt to embrace my wife and child again. Rachel said, "You're clean! I can't believe it! What happened?" I said, "I met a man named Jesus and He touched me. He gave me my health back, He gave me my family back. But more than that, He gave me a reason to live. Now, we're going to spend the rest of our lives telling people what a difference Jesus can make in their lives."

Rather than simply read the story of this miracle, I wanted to tell it to you in a way that you might make it come to life. The main truth we see in this miracle is the power of Jesus' touch. The leper I've just portrayed from Matthew 8 could have sung that old song, "He touched me. Oh, He touched me. And, oh, the joy that floods my soul. Something happened and now I know, He touched me and made me whole."

Jesus is still touching people today. As we think about this miracle, there are three personal applications I'd like you to consider.

(1) When we come down from the mountain with Jesus we discover hurting people who need His touch

I'm always talking about understanding scripture in its proper context, so consider what had just happened. We read, "When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him." (Matthew 8:1) Jesus had just finished the most famous sermon in history, the Sermon on the Mount. The message of the Sermon on the Mount wasn't delivered to the general crowd; it was

for Jesus' disciples only—not just the twelve, but others who had already committed themselves to follow Jesus. Matthew 5:1 says “Now, when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” The Sermon on the Mount isn't a message about how someone can get into heaven. It's a message about how citizens of the Kingdom of heaven should live. Just as our U.S. Constitution provides the basis for our nation, the Sermon on the Mount is the Constitution of the Kingdom of God. I can imagine it was a wonderful experience to be on the mountainside with Jesus as He shared His heart with His disciples. But Jesus didn't stay on the mountain. He came down from the mountain, because there was a crowd of people who were hurting and needed Him. The leper was just one of many who needed the power of His touch.

Remember, there's a parable in every miracle and a miracle in every parable.

Today when Jesus' disciples gather here Sunday after Sunday, it's a mountaintop experience as we praise Him and study His Word. And sadly, for some, that is the pinnacle of their faith. When they leave church they just look forward to the next spiritual high point of worship and fellowship the next Sunday. But you can't just stay on the mountaintop with Jesus. Monday through Saturday, you've got to go into the valley where the people are hurting and in need of Jesus.

A little over 56 years ago, on May 29, 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary was the first man to ascend to the pinnacle of Mount Everest, the highest point on earth, a little over 29,000 feet above sea level. He couldn't have made it without his Sherpa guides however. Overnight Sir Edmond became an international celebrity. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth and his name was a household word. He made a lot of money as a spokesman for Sears Roebuck and Company, which featured a line of outdoor equipment with his endorsement. Like many of today's celebrities, Sir Edmund Hillary could have made the rounds of the rich and famous living in luxury. But he refused to stay on the mountaintop of fame and glory. Instead, he dedicated his life to the welfare of the Sherpa people. He established the Edmund Hillary Himalayan Trust that has constructed 27 schools, two hospitals, many bridges, and laid many miles of fresh water pipelines. He continued to give his life and resources for the Sherpa people for more than 35 years. It would have been easy for him to stay on the mountaintop of fame, but he went down in to the valley to help the people who were struggling. Everyone loves being on a mountain. The scenery is magnificent and the air is clean and fresh. But the Christian life is about so much more than just gathering on the mountaintop of worship and fellowship with other disciples and enjoying Jesus. Like Jesus, we must leave the mountaintop of glory and descend into the valleys of life to show people Jesus' love.

(2) Like leprosy, sin disfigures and isolates us from hope and healing

The Bible says in Matthew 8:2, “A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’” In Bible times, leprosy was a terrible disease. It is caused by a bacterial infection (discovered in 1874 by Gerhard Hansen). Thus, it is most often referred to as “Hansen's disease” today. Leprosy caused widespread suffering up through the Middle Ages. You can visit old cathedrals in Europe and find “leper squints” in the walls. These were narrow openings through which those with leprosy could peek during church services,

because they weren't allowed inside. We don't see leprosy much any more in America because of the advent of sulfa-based medications. However, leprosy, or Hansen's disease, is still found in many tropical regions of the world.

In the Bible, leprosy was not only a disease that affected a person physically, but it also rendered them ceremonially unclean. Leviticus 13:45-46 describes the impact of leprosy: "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."

Leprosy is often used as a metaphor for sin in the Bible. Isaiah wrote, "Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt... They have forsaken the Lord...they have turned their backs on him...from the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores..." (Isaiah 1:4-6)

Thankfully, none of us have leprosy, but we ALL have been afflicted with a terrible malady worse than leprosy—a sin sickness. Leprosy ravaged the face and skin of those who suffered from it until they were unrecognizable. And like leprosy, sin has disfigured God's beautiful creation. God created Adam and Even in the beautiful Garden of Eden and the Bible says He looked at it and saw that it was good. But when Adam and Eve sinned, it was as if they sprayed ugly graffiti all over God's perfect creation.

When I was very young, I would sit next to my mother in church. Since the sermon was "boring," I would thumb through her Bible, because it had some neat pictures. I can still remember the first picture in her Bible was a replica of a painting of Adam and Eve being cast out of the Garden of Eden. It was scary. Even though I didn't know the whole story, I could tell Adam and Eve were in big trouble. The beauty and light of the Garden of Eden can be seen faintly, but where Adam and Eve are there is only darkness and ugliness. The artist captured a moment in time when it seemed as if they realized all that they were losing; sin had disfigured their lives. When you are a little kid sitting during a long sermon, you can take the time to really look at that kind of stuff. I remember thinking, "Whatever it was they did, I don't want any part of it!"

The saddest thing about leprosy is those who suffered from it were isolated from their loved ones. Like leprosy, sin isolates us 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." When a Jewish priest declared a leper unclean, he literally prayed a funeral prayer over the person, because they were considered dead already. And the Bible says in Ephesians 2:1 that before we come to know Jesus we are "dead in our trespasses and sins." Can you think of anything worse than someone being considered dead while they were still alive? I can. There are people listening to my voice right now who are still afflicted with the deadly disease of sin. It has disfigured the intended beauty God planned for your life. It has isolated you from the blessings of God—and you are DEAD right now in your trespasses and sins. That's a pretty sad scenario but I've got good news for you. Just as the leper in our text found hope, there is hope for anyone who is afflicted with this sin disease.

(3) Jesus is willing to touch you at your point of need

My favorite part of this encounter is found in verse 3, "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately he was cured of his leprosy." (Matthew 8:3)

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 bottom of their face. But Jesus ignored that restriction and He reached out and touched a man everyone else considered untouchable. And immediately the leprosy disappeared!

I certainly don't understand exactly how Jesus healed people. But I know every time Jesus healed someone, it was as if He exchanged His health for their sickness. Isaiah 53:4 says Jesus "took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows."

In Luke 8, we read about a sick woman who slipped through the crowd to touch Jesus. He realized someone has touched Him because He said, "I know that power has gone out from me." (Luke 8:46). So when Jesus healed a person, He could literally feel goodness draining from His body. Of course, when He died on the cross for our sins, He was exchanging His righteousness for our sin. When Jesus bore our own sins in His body, the Bible says He "became sin for us." (2 Corinthians 5:21) Whether it was sin, sickness, or sorrow, Jesus took them upon Himself so we would no longer suffer. There's a lovely 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." (Words by Charles H. Gabriel)

There's one final point we can gather from this miracle. We must realize our mission is the same mission of Jesus. As the Body of Christ, we must be willing to love the unlovely and touch the untouchables. Nobody would touch the leper, except Jesus. In our society today, there are people who are considered unlovely and untouchable just like the leper. We are the Body of Christ and we should not turn away from them in horror saying, "Unclean, unclean!" We should reach out to them and show them the love of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

In 1873 a young Catholic priest named Father Joseph Damien volunteered to work with the leper colony on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. He was given the care of 816 lepers who were living in squalid conditions, because they had no hope for a better life. Father Damien built a church, painted their shacks and led them to develop crops to feed the community. He told them about the love of Jesus and dressed their wounds as well. One night, after working with them for 11 years, he was soaking his feet in hot water and noticed he couldn't feel the heat. He realized he had contracted Hansen's Disease. Leprosy. The next Sunday instead of addressing his congregation with his usual, "My fellow believers," He said, "My fellow lepers..." He continued to work diligently with the lepers on the island until he died four years later at the age of 49. What a picture of what Jesus did for us! Just as Jesus became sin in order to deliver us from our sin problem, the Bible says "by His stripes you are healed."

Maybe you feel like the leper in our text. You feel as if you're living on the edge of the crowd right now because of a bitter divorce, or you're not working fulltime, or you're struggling with some addiction. Maybe you feel isolated by loneliness because you live alone. Or you may just feel unwanted, unloved, or worse, unlovable.

Jesus is here today and He is ready to help you. Will you bow before Him today? Will you say, "Lord, if you are willing you *can* help me and heal me." When you come to Him in faith, He smiles at you and reaches out and touches you right where it hurts the most and says, "I am willing! Be clean! Be healed! Be made whole!" And once He touches you, you can't help but tell everyone you meet about the power of Jesus' touch.

OUTLINE

(1) When we come down from the mountain with Jesus we discover hurting people who need His touch

"When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him." *Matthew 8:1*

(2) Like leprosy, sin disfigures and isolates us from hope and healing

"A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.'" *Matthew 8:2*

(3) Jesus is willing to touch you at your point of need

"Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately he was cured of his leprosy." *Matthew 8:3*

OUR MISSION

As the Body of Christ, we must be willing to love the unlovely and touch the untouchables.



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes