

Cleansing a Leper - Mark 1:40-45

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Our story today refers to a leper, which is a person with leprosy. According to the Encarta® World English Dictionary, leprosy is a tropical disease mainly affecting the skin and nerves that can cause tissue change and, in severe cases, loss of sensation and disfigurement. This disease thrives in warm, moist climates, such as India. It affects the skin and nerves. You can lose feeling in your limbs. In severe cases, your appearance and form is altered. Modern leprosy is not a major threat in most of the world, though. In most parts of the world people can be cured by modern medicine. And today most are naturally immune to the disease. However, the disease that Mark refers to, that is translated "leprosy", was viewed very differently by Jews. To the Jew, getting leprosy was one of the worst things that could happen to you. It was the disease they dreaded more than any other. There were several reasons they dreaded it so much. The first reason was its horrible effects. Lepers became disfigured. In the late stages of the disease they looked more like someone dead than alive. A second reason is that it was incurable. No one survived leprosy. Furthermore, leprosy was referred to as "the stroke" or "finger of God". It was seen as a God's judgment on sin. When someone got leprosy, it meant they were under God's curse. A third reason leprosy was so hated was that it was highly contagious. Anything a leper touched became unclean - even the air he breathed. Lepers were outcasts of society and God. They lived in seclusion. Anytime someone came near they were required to cry, "Unclean! Unclean!" Hearing these words filled people with fear and disgust. Being approached by a leper would be like a serial killer escaping prison and coming to your house. You would be scared for your life. Being a leper held a stigma. It might be similar to the stigma that comes with having AIDS.

This is how society viewed lepers or those with leprosy. We will learn in our story today how Jesus related to a leper.

Here is a summary: As Jesus traveled through Galilee, a leper approached Him, asking to be cleansed. Jesus cleansed the leper, but warned Him not to tell anyone and directed him to show himself to the priest. However, the man spread the news so much, that Jesus had to leave the area. While Jesus remained in secluded places, the people kept coming to Him.

What did Jesus experience in our story today? First of all, He experienced a loathsome sight. According to Matthew's account of this story (Matthew 8:2-4) Jesus was surrounded by a crowd as the leper approached Him. And according to Luke's account this man was "full of leprosy" (Luke 5:12). In other words, he was in the late stages of the disease. He was horribly disfigured. Even if I had a picture of him, I wouldn't be able to put it on the screen. It was worse than anything we would want to see. Second, Jesus experiences compassion. When everyone else ran, Jesus stood still. When everyone else cried out in fear, Jesus remained calm. When everyone else cursed, Jesus held out His hand. Jesus does not think about Himself. He feels what the leper feels. He feels his pain. He sympathizes with his rejection by society. He also understands the incredible faith this man has to come to Him and speak the words, "You can make me clean." He enters into the leper's experience. Mark says that Jesus "put out His hand and touched him." This man probably hadn't been touched in years. Certainly not by someone who cared for Him like Jesus.

Third, Jesus experienced taking a risk. His act of cleansing this leper created an urgent situation. As soon as the man was cleansed, Jesus realized the need for him to act quickly. He told the man that he must go to the priest immediately. He must be pronounced clean by the priest before the news spread. What Jesus had done would not be popular with the religious leaders. Neither Jesus nor the leper had done as the law commanded. The leper had not upheld the priest's mandate of staying away from people. Jesus had not affirmed the law's requirements. According to the law, Jesus should have sent the leper away. So Jesus takes a risk in our story today. He cleanses this leper, knowing that it would not settle well with the religious leaders.

Fourth, Jesus experienced forced seclusion. His cleansing of the leper created an unhealthy commotion. What He had done was controversial. Surely the city officials didn't want lepers storming the city. If the other lepers found out what happened to this one, surely there would be a mass influx of lepers into their town, coming to be healed. Jesus realizes that if He leaves town, things will settle down. The lepers will have no reason to come. And the excitement caused by His presence will diminish. So, He leaves. He puts His ministry in that place on hold. He goes out into some secluded places for a while. Mark says the people still found Him even here, which shows what a stir he had caused.

Well, what about the leper? What did he experience in our story? First of all, he experienced faith. We don't know exactly how this man came to believe in Jesus' power to cleanse his leprosy. It is possible that he had heard and seen Jesus' miracles. He may have watched from a distance as He healed the sick and cast out demons. Or he may have heard from a distance people talking about these things. In any case, his faith awakened hope against all reason in his heart. No one had been cleansed from leprosy since the days of Elisha. That had been about 800 years ago, when Namaan (captain of Syria) had been cleansed from his leprosy in the Jordan River. Furthermore, everyone had rejected him, even God, he had been told. But this leper must have heard that Jesus hadn't turned anyone away. He believed Jesus was his only hope. What incredible words of faith he utters, "You can make me clean."

Second, this leper experienced immediate cleansing. Mark says "As soon as" Jesus had spoken, "immediately the leprosy left him". Mark uses these words, "as soon as" and "immediately" more than any other gospel writer. He tells what happened in terms of an eyewitness account: "This, this, and this happens. And immediately, the leprosy is gone!" Can you imagine what it must have been like? One moment this man looks like a walking dead man. The next moment he is pulsing with life and energy! His skin is healthy. He can feel the dust between his toes. All his limbs and joints are working like new. He feels normal again! He looks normal. Jesus has cleansed him completely – all in a moment.

Third, this leper experienced urgent instructions. No sooner has Jesus finished saying, "Be cleansed" than He gives the man instructions. This man is ready to celebrate and announce his cleansing to the world. But Mark says that Jesus "strictly warned him". The description Mark gives here reveals that Jesus words were spoken with severity and emotion. The instructions are to "Go to the priest". This may have been the same priest who had condemned him according to the directions in Leviticus 13. Jesus also directs him to offer the sacrifices necessary for his ceremonial cleansing. According to Leviticus 14 part of his duty, beyond offering sacrifices was to shave and bathe. He was also directed to wash his clothes. So as soon as this man was cleansed, he had to hit the road. Jesus gave him an urgent agenda to accomplish, before even telling his family what had happened.

Fourth, this man experienced uncontrolled enthusiasm. Mark says he talked about his experience "freely" or openly. He probably told everybody he saw or could even find. This man was not unique in doing this. It is a natural response. When you have been freed from certain death, you get excited. But in this case he was not doing Jesus a favor. He wasn't thinking about Jesus' instructions. His enthusiasm was uncontrolled. And as a result, Jesus had to leave. He may have never gotten to speak to Jesus again.

How does this story reveal Jesus as our Example of a healthy and dangerous Christian? First of all, I believe Jesus shows us what a healthy and dangerous Christian looks like in that He was filled with limitless compassion. Society had drawn a line. No one extended sympathy to lepers. They were under the judgment of God. But Jesus crossed this line. His compassion did not know any boundaries. No one was too far gone. Not even a decomposing leper under the supposed curse of God. To have compassion means to suffer with. To have sympathy means to feel with. Jesus experienced both of these. He entered into this leper's experience. He felt what the leper felt. I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who feels people's pain. You may have "difficult people" in your life. They're harsh and rough around the edges. But did you ever stop to think that the reason they are like this is because they're hurting? They might tell you otherwise. They might have pushed it down so far, they have become unaware of it. But they have pain inside. The homeless beggar standing and watching you on the exit ramp may irritate you. You may wonder why they don't get it together and go find some work to earn some money. But did you ever stop to feel their pain? You might not

always be able to fix their problems. But I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who feels people's pain.

Second, I believe Jesus shows us what a healthy and dangerous Christian looks like in that He educated the leper. He didn't send him off, saying, "Have fun! Enjoy your new life!" I believe He tried to let this man know that not everyone would be happy for him. Some would become angry about it. Jesus also told this man, in essence, "You need to follow the rules. You're not free now to do whatever you want. The law that condemned you as a leper still is binding on you. You need to go to the priest and do what the law says." This leper's experience might have been like an ex-convict being released after decades in prison. You can't just leave them. They need education. They need to know how to live in their new world. I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who educates new believers. New believers need to know that they are entering a war zone. The whole host of Satan and his angels are not happy with their new experience. A healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who takes the time to educate new believers on how to survive as a Christian in a hostile environment. The life of a Christian is completely different from anything we have experienced before. It's a whole new way of living. New believers need to be educated in order to be prepared for life after cleansing.

Third, I believe Jesus shows us what a healthy and dangerous Christian looks like in that He saved the leper from disapproval. As long as the leper remained so, the law given in Leviticus condemned him. The law ostracized him to banishment from society. But when Jesus cleansed the leper, what the law said concerning lepers no longer applied to him. Why? Because he was no longer a leper. Jesus directed him to the priest. It is implied in the story that the priest testified of his cleansing. He pronounced him clean. The priest recognized that he was no longer a leper. The law that once condemned the leper now testified that he was clean indeed. The law gave credibility to this man's experience. I believe a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who would rather see sinners saved than get what they deserve. It's easy to point out what people have done wrong. It's easy to pronounce judgment. But it's an entirely different thing to show them they don't have to live like that. The Christian response is to lead them to Jesus where they can become clean. When they're clean, there is no reason to condemn them. They are completely new. There are plenty of people ready to condemn. What this world needs is more people offering hope.

Consider the only words spoken by the leper that Mark quotes: "If you are willing, you can make me clean." On one hand this statement contains words of great faith in Jesus' power. On the other hand it contains words of uncertainty in what Jesus was willing to do. The leper's faith was sure Jesus could heal him. But he didn't know for sure if Jesus wanted to. Often our question is not, "Can God do it?" He's God. He can do anything. Sure He is able to help me. But does He want to? Jesus' reply gives to the leper was recorded for us. These words answer our doubts and questions. They give us hope. "I am willing. Be cleansed."

Maybe today you're feeling unclean. You've looked at those pictures in the magazine or on the internet again, and you feel unclean. You've spent years filling your body with toxic substances, and you feel unclean. You've spoken words that you now regret, and you feel unclean. Your heart is filled with anger, hatred, or jealousy, and you feel unclean. Maybe you've been running away from God. Your life is nothing more than reacting with fear or doing whatever your feelings dictate. And you feel unclean. Here the words of Jesus, "I am willing. Be cleansed."