

Miracle # 6
"Jesus Cleanses the Leper"

Mark 1:40-45, Luke 5:12-15, Matthew 8:1-4

As we noted in the last lesson early on the morning after Jesus had healed Peter's Mother-in-law and all the other sick who had been brought to Him; Jesus retired to a quiet place to pray. When Peter and the other disciples quickly set out to find him. As soon as caught up with Him they reported that he was the talk of the neighborhood and Jesus told the disciples that he would not be returning to do more healing but rather he must continue on in order to proclaim his message of salvation.

It is not easy to harmonize all of the gospel accounts of this incident, because there is no direct evidence of the exact order of the events. Each of the gospel narratives must be examined in order to get the complete story of this miracle.

During His preaching tour of the area Jesus met a man suffering from leprosy. Mark does not tell us the exact place that this occurs, while Luke tells states that it happened in one of the towns. Matthew, however tells us that it occurred after Jesus had come down from the mountain on which he had preached His "Sermon on the Mount."

Mark 1:40-45

"Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." (41) Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." (42) As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. (43) And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once, (44) and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." (45) However, he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the matter, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction."

Luke 5:12-16

"And it happened when He was in a certain city, that behold, a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus; and he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." (13) Then He put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately the leprosy left him. (14) And He charged him to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded." (15) However, the report went around concerning Him all the more; and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. (16) So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed."

Matthew 8:1-4

"When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. (2) And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."(3) Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (4) And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

The Background Of The Miracle

We are told that man who comes to Jesus for healing is a leper. The word "leprosy" was a term used to describe a wide range of **skin** diseases. And covered everything from psoriasis and ringworm to true leprosy which is today called "Hanson's disease." With the limited knowledge of the day, both curable and incurable diseases were called leprosy. There are three forms of leprosy. First there is **nodular** or **tubercular** leprosy. The disease could begin as an unaccountable sluggishness and pain the joints. It begins with little specks on the eyelids and on the palms of the hands. Then it spreads over the whole body. It bleaches the hair white and it covers the skin with scales and oozing sores. Nodules gather on the cheek, nose and forehead. The whole appearance of the face is changed, until the sufferer no longer even appears human.

Second, there is **anaesthetic** leprosy. The initial stages are the same but in addition there is a loss of **feeling** in extremities. The victim loses all sense of touch and pain, initially in the fingers and toes, then spreading up the arms and legs. Because of injuries, infections etc. there is a progressive loss of fingers of toes and in the end even the loss of a whole hand or foot.

Third, the most common of all, is the first two types mixed. It was a terrible fate, there was no cure; no even a speedy death, only a slow torturous death of eventual decay. [William Barclay. And He Had Compassion: The Miracles of Jesus. (Valley Forge: Judson Press) pp. 32-33]

So leprosy advances, a leper doesn't even look human. No fingers. No toes. Many of them blind. Ulcerated growth all over their faces. Nobody wanted to be near them, nobody wanted to touch them. A leper becomes utterly repulsive - both to themselves and to others.

Trench describes it this way, "Leprosy was nothing short of a living death, a corruption of all the humors, a poisoning of the very springs of life; a dissolution little by little of the whole body, so that one limb after another actually decayed and fell away." **[As quoted by Herbert Lockyer. All the Miracles of the Bible. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1961) p. 172]**

As terrible as leprosy was in itself, it was made twice as terrible by the treatment given to the leper. The Jews called leprosy "the finger of God" indicating that that they regarded the disease as a direct **punishment** from God. Luke with his usual professional accuracy of a physician uses a precise term that man who came to Jesus was "**full of leprosy**" indicating that the leprosy was fully advanced and it is last stages. His case was severe, and he had probably been a leper for a long time.

The leper was isolated. No disease in the ancient world isolated an individual from society as much as leprosy did. In fact the word "quarantine" comes to us from the

practice of the Jews. In Italy in the fourteenth century people noticed that in times of plague that the Jews were much less severely hit than anyone else. They came to the conclusion that it was the result of the Jewish practice of isolating as unclean anyone who had touched a dead body. The Italian authorities therefore enacted a law that isolated for forty days anyone who had contact with a suspected case of the plague. The Italian word for is **quaranta**, hence the word **quarantine** today. [Barclay. p. 32]

In Leviticus, leprosy is the most serious of all forms of uncleanness- such as the result of touching an unclean animal – were cleansed by waiting until evening and washing. Other forms of uncleanness, such as childbirth required a longer waiting period and the offering of a sacrifice.

But leprosy was much different. All the other forms of uncleanness required the person stay away from the temple but leprosy required the person to live apart completely, to be utterly cut off from the congregation of Israel. Leviticus 13:45-46 says, *"Now the leper on whom the sore is, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare; and he shall cover his mustache, and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' (46) "He shall be unclean. All the days he has the sore he shall be unclean. He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."*

The leper is to dress like a mourner going to a burial service – his own burial service. He had to constantly cry out every where he went – "Unclean, Unclean."

The Elements of the Miracle

Mark gives us the atmosphere of the event telling us that the leper came running to Jesus and fell on his knees at his feet (1:40). The leper expressed confidence that Jesus could heal his disease if he chose to do so. The leper was right. Jesus could heal him and he did!

Lord If You Are Willing? (Luke 5:12)

"... he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

There is with his request a mingling of faith and insecurity. The leper had no doubt about Jesus' ability to cure him. But he was uncertain about was Jesus **willingness** to do so.

There is an obvious point of application for us today. There are those who teach that healing is provided by God for every possible physical ailment that a Christian might have. In fact they teach that is wrong to ever be ill and all we have do is ask in faith and that God is obligated to heal us. They would say that it is a lack of faith to pray, "Lord if it is your will, heal me." They say that we must be bold and claim our healing. It is a much more biblical approach to say as the leper did, "Lord if it is your will, I believe that you can heal."

Although it may be hard for us to accept the concept, but Scripture teaches that sometimes it is not God's will for us to be healed. The example of the Apostle Paul comes to mind, who came before the Lord three times asking for a removal of his *"thorn in the flesh"* (2 Cor. 12:7). Finally God's answer came, *"My grace is sufficient for you"* (2 Cor. 12:9). Whatever the ailment was, Paul wanted to be rid of it, but God knew there would be spiritual benefits which Paul would not receive by being healed. So instead of taking away the ailment he gave Paul the strength to bear it.

Notice also that the leper sought to be **cleansed** not just healed. It is significant that the leper does not simply say to Jesus 'Heal Me' but rather he says, 'Make me clean.' On the surface those two things may seem to be the same but they are not. You

see while it is true that the leper's disease had caused him a great deal of physical distress, but it is his uncleanness which has separated him from God's **people**. A leper was excluded from the sacrifices, religious festivals and worship services. In many ways, he was only separated from God's people he was separated from God. It is hardly surprising then that one of this man's strongest urges was to be cleansed so that he could once again **worship** with the people of God. This man wanted to worship God and Jesus gave him the ability to do so.

He Was Moved With Compassion (Mark 1:41)

"Then Jesus, moved with compassion..."

The Greek word for "*compassion*" is **splanchnizomai**, which depicts the emotions of pity, compassion and love. The word suggests a depth of feeling and literally means "to feel with." Jesus did care no matter what this man's past may have been. The writer of Hebrews (4:15-16) tells us that in Jesus, *"... we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. (16) Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

He Put Out His hand and Touched Him. (Mk 1:41-42)

"He... stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed."

This act was doubly significant.

1. It was a True Expression of **Compassion**.

As much as this leper needed and desired healing, his heart must have ached for the touch of another human hand. How terrible it must have been to have seen everyone draw back at his approach, lest they be contaminated by even brushing against him. Jesus responded not only to what this man asked for but his deepest **need** as well.

2. It was a Stunning Demonstration of His **Power**. (v. 42) *"As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed."*

This was a stunning display of power in that according to the law anyone who touched such a person became ritually unclean. But the touch of Jesus had the opposite effect. That which had been unclean became clean.

Go and Show Yourself to the Priest. (Luke 5:14)

"...But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded."

Jesus instructed the cleansed leper to do what God's law required for several reasons.

First, it demonstrated His **position** on the law. It is important to note that Jesus' conflict with the religious leadership of Israel over the "law" was over their **additions** to the law not over the law itself.

Secondly, what the priest did was a picture of the **cost** of his cleansing. There is an interesting picture in what the priest was to do for the leper. According

to Leviticus 14 the priest after examining the leper and finding him healed, an earthen vessel filled with water and two birds. The first bird was killed and his blood poured to the water. The priest then took the blood and applied to the wings of the living bird. The bird was then released and as he flew away the leper could see the blood dripping down from the bird and understand the price of his cleansing and the message to the leper was, **"I am clean because of the blood."** The believer is likewise reminded in 1 Peter 1:18-19, *"knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, (19) but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."*

Third, Jesus wanted this to be a testimony of his power to the **priest's**. As mighty witness in that this is the first instance of a leper being cleansed in the 1,500 years since the instructions were given in Leviticus 13:34. It was the fulfillment of the miraculous healing that the prophet Isaiah said would mark the arrival of the Messiah.

He charged Him to Tell No One. (Luke 5:14)

And He charged him to tell no one,.... (15) However, the report went around concerning Him all the more; and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities."

Jesus sternly told him not to tell anyone about the miracle that had just been performed. Instead he should go to the priest and make the offering prescribed by the law. According to the law "if" a person were to recover from the disease he or she had to go to officiating priest in Jerusalem and make an offering according to the dictates of Leviticus 14:14. By insisting on the legal purification ritual Jesus was making it clear that He was working within the Jewish law and not flouting it.

It is easy for us to be critical of the healed leper for his failure to keep silent about what had happened to him. Yet on some level we understand that he just could not keep silent. The joy he felt simply overflowed.

Yet how strange it is – that although we understand that we have been commanded by Jesus to share the cleansing that we have experienced through Jesus – we are disobediently **silent**.

The Effect of the Miracle.

To the Leper

According to Mark 1:42, Jesus healed the disease (*"the disease left him"*) and *"he cleansed him,"* the healing is two-fold he is healed which is **physical** and was cleansed – that's **spiritual**.

To the LORD (Mark 1:45)

"However, he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the matter, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction."

Because of this man's disobedience, no matter how unwittingly or unintentional it may have been, he hindered and limited the ministry of Jesus. Do you ever wonder if the ministry of Jesus is hindered because of our disobedience? As a result, a limitation was set upon Jesus, he could not come into the cities but had to stay in the countryside.