

Touching the Untouchable
Mark 1:40-45
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He knew something was wrong...very wrong. But he hoped if he waited long enough, it would just go away. But it didn't. In fact, it only got worse. Soon, others started to notice that he looked pale and sickly; and he realized that he would have to take a journey to a far-away city to figure out what exactly was going on.

After several days, he reached Jerusalem and was shown to a room. After what seemed like several hours, the door opened and an official looking man entered and examined the stranger, *"It's here,"* as he rolled up his sleeve to reveal an open, runny sore. Again he said, *"It's here,"* as he slipped his collar to the side, exposing another oozing puss-filled pimple. *"It's here too,"* as he removed his sandal, where there was yet another nasty nodule on the top of his foot.

And with that, the official jumped back with a wild look in his eyes and said to the man, *"I declare unto you that you are unclean."* And then he quoted Leviticus 13:45-46: ***"The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp."***

He then said one last sentence: *"May God have mercy on your soul!"* And at once, the door slammed shut and the priest was gone.

The man's worst nightmare had just come true. Leprosy was the most dreaded disease at that time, much like AIDS or Ebola today. As he slowly picked himself up, he stood in that dark room for several minutes in a state of shock. Then, with determination, he started ripping his favorite robe that his wife had made for him. Then he bent down and gathered some dust and rubbed it all over his face and hair until he looked like someone from a horror movie. When he stepped outside, he slowly covered his mouth and choked out the dreaded words, ***"UNCLEAN! I'M UNCLEAN!!!"***

And for the first time in his life, people wretched and recoiled when they saw him. A mother quickly grabbed her children and yelled, *"Don't touch that man! Stay*

away from him!” A vendor of vegetables threw something at him and shouted, “GET OUT OF HERE!”

Quickly the leper made his way outside the city into the open countryside and headed for the 80-mile walk home. But the worst was yet to come, because he knew he could no longer have contact with his wife or children! When his wife saw him coming from a distance, she and their children ran to him with joy and excitement, only to hear him growl, *“KEEP AWAY FROM ME! I AM NO LONGER YOUR FATHER! I AM A LEPER!”*

A funeral was held for him by the local Rabbi because he was considered dead the moment he was diagnosed. The man’s health went downhill quickly. His body started decomposing and the odor of death poured out of every pore. He lost all feeling in his extremities and could no longer sense pain. His fingers eventually fell off. The word “leprosy” is from *lepros*, meaning scaly. In the Old Testament “leprosy” means *“to rot”* and that’s exactly what was happening. His skin was like a pool of slime. He was a dead man walking...or trying to walk.

When people saw him they would throw stones at him...as he neared the end of his life, his face resembled a lion’s more than a man’s. He hardly looked human anymore. He was isolated and unwanted. One of the laws added by the rabbis said that it was unlawful for a leper to get within 50 feet of a clean person. On a windy day the rule changed to 200 feet.

Leprosy was a physical disease but it also made this man spiritually dirty and socially distant. He was decaying and dying in slow motion as he progressively self-destructed. His eyesight was failing and he knew complete blindness was approaching. The leper had become utterly repulsive to others...and to himself!

These five words describe his condition [Hold up cardboard sign].

Unclean!

Unwanted!

Unworthy!

Unloved!

Isolated!

In Mark 1:40-45, we’re going to learn that Jesus loves the unlovely and touches the untouchable. As we walk through this passage we’ll see the man’s *misery*, Jesus’ *mercy* and finally, the *mission* he was given.

1. Misery. This man was in misery. Men like him were told to “*stand at a distance*” like the 10 lepers did in Luke 17:12. But according to Mark 1:40 this outcast “*came to him, imploring him, and kneeling, said to him...*” It’s really amazing that he “came to Christ” because lepers were forced to live in isolation and to have no personal contact with any person.

Because he was in such misery, he came to Christ. This mass of rotting flesh had faith that Jesus could heal what no one else could. Dr. Luke mentions in Luke 5:12 that he was “*full of leprosy*” or “*covered*” with it and that he “*fell on his face.*” Matthew 8:2 tells us that the leper addressed Jesus as “*Lord.*” The word “*imploring*” means, “*to beseech strongly or to beg.*” This reminds me of how passionately Moses asked God to heal his sister Miriam’s leprosy in Numbers 12:13: “*And Moses cried to the LORD, ‘O God, please heal her—please.’*”

As he stumbled through the crowd on what remained of his feet, the crowd would have gasped in horror, covered their mouths and noses, and scattered. It took courage to come to Christ in the presence of all these people. It also took great humility. With his vocal chords damaged by numerous nodules, his voice would have been raspy, his breath wheezy in sound and putrid in smell: “*If you will, you can make me clean.*”

Brothers and sisters, this is the right way to ask Jesus for help. The man knew that Jesus *could* make him clean - he had great confidence in His power; he just wasn’t sure if He *would*. He came on his knees and begged and yet he was submissive to the Sovereignty of the Savior.

Would you notice that he didn’t “claim” what he thought was his or demand it with a certain formula? One prosperity preacher, who previously raised funds for a \$65 million personal jet, recently tweeted: “*Jesus bled and died for us so that we can lay claim to the promise of financial prosperity.*” I’m sorry but I thought He bled and died to forgive us for our sins!

And so the first thing we see is this man’s *misery*. Second, we see the *mercy* of Jesus.

2. Mercy. While everyone else was repulsed by the leper and couldn’t even look at him, verse 41 says that Jesus was “*moved with pity.*” This means He was so “*filled with compassion*” that it gripped him deeply in his gut, or literally, in his bowels. Jesus felt the agony of the leper’s isolation. It was common for Christ to

be filled with compassion as we see in Mark 6:34: ***“He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”***

So, here’s a question. When you see someone in misery are you moved with mercy?

Jesus did more than just feel some mercy. He was touched in his heart and therefore ***“He stretched out his hand and touched him.”*** This was not a tentative touch. The Greek refers to Jesus *“extending”* his hand and *“fastening or adhering”* to the leper. Rather than pulling back, He reached out and gripped the leper. He was not repelled or repulsed [Go and touch someone]. This guy had probably not been touched in years.

Jesus loved to give the touch of tenderness. I count 8 times in the Gospel of Mark where we read of Him touching someone. Pastor Kent Hughes once counseled a man who was not a Christian. He had no family and no church. He was so lonely that he got his hair cut once a week just so someone could touch him.

Don’t miss the significance of Jesus touching a leper. No one was allowed to even get close to a leper because uncleanness would be transferred to the one who touched him. In addition, the leprosy itself could be passed on. But deity cannot be defiled.

And then Jesus declared, ***“I will...”*** Everything has to do with His will, doesn’t it? He can do anything but it must line up with His will and His timing in order for it to happen. Jesus then says: ***“Be clean!”*** When His will is ready all He needs to do is say the word and it will happen. Verse 42: ***“And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.”*** *“Immediately”* is Mark’s favorite word, used over 40 times in his manuscript.

In that split second, this man’s fingers were back. The leprosy had come on in stages but it left suddenly. His toes were attached again. His skin became soft and supple. His eyesight was back to normal. He was instantly cured and cleansed.

What happens next is a bit surprising and even startling.

3. Mission. Jesus is not done. He sees misery and extends mercy *so that* this man will live on mission. Jesus doesn’t give a suggestion but actually is about to give an extremely strong command. Check out verse 43: ***“And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once...”***

- **It was authoritative** – “*Jesus sternly charged him...*” This word was used of a horse snorting.
- **It was forceful** – “*and sent him away...*” This literally means that “*he thrust him out of the crowd*” because he had a mission to accomplish.
- **It was urgent** – “*at once.*”

In verse 44 the command of Christ is quite clear: “*See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.*” There are actually two parts to this command, one negative: “*say nothing to anyone,*” and one positive: “*show yourself to the priest.*” This man, who is in Galilee, is told to make the journey to Jerusalem, which would take several days, and to meet with the priest [maybe the same one who had diagnosed him] and follow what the Law dictated.

But the man disobeys in verse 45: “*But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news...*” I like how the King James renders this verse: “*But he went out, and began to publish it much, and to blaze abroad the matter...*”

Interestingly, he’s told to not tell anybody, and he tells everybody; we’re told to tell everybody and we don’t tell anybody. He was touched and so he went out and testified, but he ended up harming, more than helping the cause of Christ: “*...so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to Him from every quarter.*”

I can think of five reasons why this man’s actions were detrimental.

- **It was disobedient.** 1 Samuel 15:22 says, “*To obey is better than sacrifice.*” Here’s a question. Have you been delivered like the leper but still have an area of disobedience in your life? It’s common for people to get what they want from Jesus and then turn around and do what they want. Do you find yourself saying, “*I know what the Bible says...but?*”

Some of us won’t obey if we don’t understand. Listen. Just get over it. You won’t understand everything Jesus asks you to do. There will be some things He says and does that won’t make sense to you. If you ever find yourself thinking something like this, “*I just can’t see God being that way...it doesn’t make sense to me...*” you should stop and check your heart. Ponder this statement: “*Faith means doing what God has told you to do, even if you don’t fully understand the reason why.*”

- **It hampered Jesus.** It's interesting that now the leper can go into the cities but Jesus can't. Disobedience, even if it comes from good motives, can lead to the hindering of the work of Jesus. Here's a question: *Do you have any disobedience going on that is hindering the work of Jesus right now?*
- **It confused the mission.** The people flocked to His miracles more than the message of the gospel. Jesus came to preach, not to perform for others. The miracles were intended to validate His message and His mission.
- **It short-circuited ministry to the priests.** The priests missed out on compelling proof that Jesus was who He said He was. The cleansing of the leper was an undeniable messianic sign according to Matthew 11:5. If the priests declared the leper clean but rejected the One who cleansed him, their unbelief would be incriminating evidence against them.
- **It kept him from fully entering society.** Had he gone to the priest he would have been given documentation that he was no longer to be ostracized from the community. His disobedience ended up hurting the cause of Christ and himself. Disobedience does that.

A Miracle with a Message

Within this miracle, there is a message for each of us today. I want to break it down for two groups of people -- first for those who are not yet saved and then for those of us who are followers of Christ.

1. A Message for Unbelievers. This encounter between the Lord and the leper is a parable about sin and salvation.

- Sin, like leprosy, starts out small and spreads -- laziness turns to lust; alcohol to alcoholism; petting on a date can lead to pregnancy.
- Like leprosy, sin can deaden and numb us.
- Sin can progressively enslave us.
- Like leprosy, sin defiles everything it touches.
- Sin spiritually disfigures us.
- Sin isolates us.
- Satan presents sin as pleasurable when, in fact, it's putrid.

- Sin can destroy our lives. As someone has said, *“Sin will take you further than you planned to go, cost you more than you can pay, and keep you longer than you were planning to stay.”*
- Like leprosy, sin is terminal.
- Anything a leper touched was destined for the fire (Leviticus 13:52). Likewise, sin leads to eternal judgment.

Fellow sinner, see yourself as miserable for you are filled with the leprosy of sin and fling yourself upon the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ! You have a deadly disease that has defiled you. Some of you have not been saved yet precisely because you don't see yourself as a sick sinner. Apart from Christ, every one of us is a mess of rotting flesh, the stench of our sin being repugnant before a holy God.

What Jesus did for the leper He can do for you as well. One touch from the Savior and you will never be the same again. Nothing is too gross or ugly or dirty or shameful for the Savior to cleanse!

Dear friend, do you need cleansing today? Will you come to Jesus and fall at His feet and say,

“Lord, I’m desperate and need help. I have a sin problem and I’m miserable. I know I’m going to die from this sin unless you forgive me. Please show me mercy. I know you can save me. Will you? I ask you right now to touch my sinful heart and take away my sin and then enable me to live on mission for you.”

After being cleansed by Christ, the leper would be able to write some new words to describe his life. [hold up cardboard sign]

Clean!
Wanted!
I have worth!
Loved!
In community!

Our *misery* is worse than we think...the *mercy* of Jesus is deeper than we imagine...and our *mission* is greater than we realize.

2. A Message for Believers. Fellow followers of Jesus, we're called to reach out with compassion, to love the unlovable and touch the untouchable.

A week ago I was listening to Janet Parshall on Moody Radio (one of our “Go” partners). She was interviewing Craig Groeschel about his new book called, *“#Struggles – Following Jesus in a Selfie-Centered World.”* He quoted a groundbreaking study of 14,000 people that showed a sharp decline in compassion in our culture. Here’s a summary – *“We care 40% less as a whole than we did in the 1980s.”* There are three reasons for this:

#1. In our selfie-centered world, we have become increasingly obsessed with ourselves.

#2. We have less personal interaction with people, which makes it easy to not care.

#3. The overwhelming exposure to news and needs in the world is actually desensitizing us. Whenever we read something on a screen everything gets equal “real estate” and looks equally important: *“If I’m scrolling through I might see a new recipe for guacamole, and then a story about a football player beating his girlfriend and then a link to a funny cat video and then a picture of someone being beheaded by ISIS.”*

Researchers argue that our brains don’t know how to distinguish between how all these stories show up in our newsfeeds. An ISIS beheading doesn’t grab our attention because it shows up right next to guacamole and cat videos.

Friends, we are called to compassionately care for people, not just on a screen, but face-to-face. Who do you need to reach out and touch, literally?

Two years ago my daughter Lydia and I visited my oldest daughter Emily who was serving as a missionary to at-risk children in the Dominican Republic. I’ll never forget walking up a steep hillside with a number of kids on the way to their village. A young boy reached out to hold my hand. I looked at his hand and saw that it was dirty and had open sores. I pulled my hand back. And then I looked up the hill and saw Emily. Both of her hands held the hands of two children. Another young girl was riding on her back. Lydia was also holding hands with two little girls. I was convicted and reached out for the young boy’s hand. He looked up at me and smiled, through rotting teeth. I felt rotten inside and was thankful for the example of my daughters as they followed Jesus more fully than I was.

Here are some groups of people that could use a touch from us.

- Those with depression and mental illness
- The elderly, especially those in a nursing home

- Widows and widowers
- Those from a different political party
- Those of a different race or ethnicity
- Those who live in a different state – the river *does* divide for some
- Refugees
- Women who get pregnant outside of marriage (glad that we're raising funds for a mobile ultrasound van!)
- Singles
- Single parents
- The preborn
- The orphans
- The less fortunate
- Those with AIDS
- The alone and forgotten
- The disabled
- Those with cancer
- Anyone not in your clique or social class
- Or anyone you're holding a grudge against
- Those with hurts, habits and hang-ups – I'm sure glad Celebrate Recovery is a place of grace! The 14th Anniversary service is next Friday night.
- Chicago Bear fans

Philip Yancey writes: “*The modern church rejects the outcasts of society where as these very outcasts were the very ones who were drawn to Jesus.*” To Jesus, no one is untouchable. Here’s a question: Are you moved with mercy over the plight of the miserable?

If you’ve moved from being *miserable* to receiving *mercy*, you are now *on mission*. It’s time to start living that way. As we learned from Mike Hillhouse last weekend, our glorious mission is to take the gospel to the nations: “*Missions is not a commitment to keep; it’s a cross to carry.*”

As a follow-up to last weekend, we’re participating in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. We want to conclude by focusing on these faithful followers.

Interview with Chasity Holmquist

1. Tell us a bit about yourself.

2. How did you get interested in Voice of the Martyrs and how has it impacted you?

3. Can you tell us about persecution around the world?

4. How can we respond?

- Prisoners**
- Giving**
- Prayer**

We're going to watch a video of a frontline worker right now and when it's finished, we're going to pray for the persecuted.

Persecution is a terrible thing, but unfaithfulness is far worse. (Pritchard)

When you leave today we want you to pick up some information to help put your faith into practice.