

## **“A Leper’s Encounter with Jesus”**

Mark 1:40-45

Oct 3, 2021

It was one of the most nervous times of my life. I was a college student standing before a pulpit at the Eugene Mission- a homeless shelter for men. Looking over the audience you could see people who probably had not taken a shower for a while, some who looked high on drugs or inebriated from alcohol, some who were nodding off during the service. They were sitting in the pews not because they all wanted to be there but because chapel was required in order to receive dinner.

Here was this young, clean cut guy about to share his first sermon before these men. What could I possibly share with these men who were so different than me in many ways and yet so similar in another way?

The passage I shared was the very one we chose to begin our new series on “Encounters with Jesus.” In this series, we are going to look at interactions Jesus had with different kinds of people and how their lives were changed as a result. This series will give us a good glimpse on who Jesus is and why He is worth trusting in and following. There is no one like Jesus.

The first encounter we will discuss is between Jesus and a leper. Please turn with me to Mark chapter 1 beginning with verse 38. It is page 837 in the Bibles under the chair in front of you. “And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.”<sup>39</sup> And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.<sup>40</sup> And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.”<sup>41</sup> Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.”<sup>42</sup> And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.<sup>43</sup> And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once,<sup>44</sup> and said to him, “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.”<sup>45</sup> But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, 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.” Mark 1:38–45 (ESV)

While Jesus was traveling from place to place preaching the good news of His kingdom, He would encounter many people needing to be freed from demon oppression or healed from their illnesses. As Jesus walked into an area a man with leprosy came up to Him.

In order to understand the gravity of this encounter we need to look at the background of:

### **The life of a leper.**

In Jesus’ day there were many who were deemed hopeless and looked down upon by the Jewish people- like women of ill repute and Samaritans. But the most hopeless in Jesus’ day from a Jewish perspective were lepers.

Leprosy is a horrendous skin disease. Listen to this description of the disease. “It begins with specks on the eyelids and on the palms, gradually spreading over the body, bleaching the hair white wherever they appear, crusting the affected parts with white scales, and causing terrible sores and swellings. From the skin the disease eats inward to the bones, rotting the whole body piecemeal.” (*Easton's Bible dictionary*)

One of the biggest problems with leprosy is that the disease destroys nerve endings. As a result people lose their sense of pain and cannot tell when they have damaged a hand or foot or when an appendage has an infection. When you touch a hot stove, your nerve endings send messages to the brain to pull your hand away. Leprosy destroys those sensors so one’s hand could receive 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns and not know it.

As the disease spreads, many lepers go blind -- not because of the disease itself, but because, without feeling in their eyes, they forget to blink. Blinking functions like our

car's windshield wipers, washing away the impurities. It is pain that causes us to blink. No pain, no blinking.

Dr Paul Brand, a Christian missionary who conducted some of the most influential research on the disease writes, "The loneliest people of all are the ones for whom leprosy has also destroyed their sight. Like many others in the world, they are blind, but unlike most of the blind they can't use their hands to bring them the sensations that their eyes are denied because they can't feel either."

As leprosy advances, the victim looks less and less human. No fingers. No toes. No nose. Face disappearing.

Since Leprosy is contagious, Lepers were required to live away from others. Leviticus chapter 13-14 explain how the Israelites dealt with leprosy. Leviticus 13:45-46, "The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'<sup>46</sup> As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp."

Leprosy created isolation, rejection, banishment. One day you could be an important person with lots of friends and because of a skin disease you could lose it all.

One day you could be worshipping at the Temple with family and friends. Then this disease pops up and you are no longer welcome at the Temple. You are considered unclean.

Imagine having to isolate from the people you love the most. Imagine wearing not only the effects of leprosy, but the stigma that you are a sinful person who deserves what you received.

When COVID first arrived on the scene, those infected by it were treated in a small way like lepers. They were pushed away from society. They were told to stay away. They were deemed unsafe and contagious. They were looked down upon.

COVID has been around long enough that it no longer has the same intensity regarding getting sick. Instead the intensity has shifted to vaccinated vs. unvaccinated. If you are unvaccinated, blogs and media are painting the picture that you should not be accepted. You are labeled dangerous and unloving. Some even write that if the unvaccinated end up getting COVID they should not be allowed admittance into hospitals. They deserve what they get. Sound familiar to how people responded to lepers?

Lepers in Jesus' day were sent outside the camp and not welcome back in. They were spiritually unclean and could never worship in the Temple again. Lepers didn't get healed. Once you got leprosy there was no hope for healing. The leprosy only got worse. This would be your lot in life.

Ever felt rejected? Ever felt like you didn't belong and were an outcast? Do you feel like your lot in life is hopeless? Where can you turn when your life is hopeless and you feel despised, rejected and alone? There is good news. You can come to Jesus. And that is just what the leper did. Jesus is the hope for the hopeless.

We will see three character traits of Jesus that give the hopeless hope. And these character traits are evident in Jesus throughout the gospels. That is who He is.

The first character trait that gives the hopeless hope is:

**Jesus is approachable**

Lepers were forbidden to approach someone who was clean. Lepers were to stay outside the towns and cities and if anyone clean were to approach they were required to yell, "Unclean! Unclean!" But this leper disregarded the rules. He saw Jesus and knew there was something different about Him.

Maybe he had heard about Jesus' healing ministry and that gave him hope. Or maybe seeing how Jesus related to those around Him made the leper believe that he could approach Jesus and not be turned away. Whatever it was the leper came up to Jesus. Verse 40 says, "Mark 1:40 (ESV), "A leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean."

The leper came face-to-face with Jesus and fell to his knees crying out passionately, "I beg of you, please".

Jesus was not the only one present that day with the leper. There were others with Him. Can you see as the leper comes quickly toward Jesus, those around him start backing up? They wanted to be a safe distance away. And yet Jesus didn't take one step backwards.

The leper said, "If you are willing you can make me clean." The leper didn't question the ability of Jesus which is amazing because there were only two examples in the Old Testament where God healed a leper. The reality was once you contracted leprosy you would never be cured. But this leper believed that the man standing before Him had the power to do it.

What the leper didn't know was whether Jesus would be willing to heal him. I am sure the leper had many reasons in his head why Jesus may not heal him. Maybe, the leper believed that he deserved the leprosy as judgment- after all he had been told that before. But the leper had to ask. With Jesus, anything is possible.

The leper learned about the second character trait of Jesus that gives the hopeless hope. He learned that:

**Jesus is compassionate**

Verse 41, "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean."

The word pity in our text has the idea of “deep pity”- a strong compassion. Jesus saw the plight and heartache of the leper and He was deeply moved. He had to act to relieve the leper of his disease and restore him to life. So Jesus said, “I am willing, be clean!”

If you read through this passage too fast you might miss an amazing phrase, “Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.” Jesus healed people by different methods. Jesus healed people by just proclaiming they are healed. He healed people that weren’t even present at the time. But in this situation, Jesus chose to touch the leper as he was healed.

In touching the leper, Jesus willingly became religiously unclean while the leper became clean. Does that sound familiar? 2 Cor. 5:21, “He who had no sin became sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

But Jesus had another reason for touching the man. Put yourself in the leper’s place. When was the last time you were touched by someone clean? When was the last time someone showed compassion and care for you? When was the last time a clean person looked you in the eyes without turning his or her head away in disgust? You cannot remember because it has been so long ago. By touching the leper, Jesus gave him dignity, worth and he experienced great love.

When Sadan contracted leprosy, he was rejected by his classmates, forcefully thrown off a public bus, was denied a job even though he had good training and talent and was turned away by hospitals with the harsh statement, “We don’t treat lepers here.” Sadan tells the story how he came to meet Dr. Brand and his wife Margaret some 20 years earlier. He wrote, “I can still remember when Dr. Brand took my infected, bleeding feet in his hands. I had been to many doctors. A few had examined my hands and feet from a distance, but Drs. Paul and Margaret were the first medical doctors who dared to touch me. I had nearly forgotten what human touch felt like.”

The leper experienced first-hand Jesus' compassion. He also experienced the third character trait that gives the hopeless hope:

**Jesus is powerful.**

Lepers were not supposed to be healed. They were not cured and restored to a new life. As I shared earlier there were only two occurrences when a leper was healed in the Old Testament. Miriam, Moses' sister became leprous due to judgment by God. She was healed after Moses prayed to God.

Naaman was a highly regarded commander in the army of Aram. He had leprosy and the Prophet Elisha healed him. But these are the only two healings known in the world at that time. **Rabbis believed that it was as difficult to heal the leper as to raise the dead.**" (p. 89, *NICNT*)

But Jesus is God and is able to heal. He is able to restore the man- not just physically but also socially. He was given his life back. Rejection was gone. Despair was gone. Denial was gone. Aloneness was gone. No more living outside of town. He could live on Main Street. He could use his skills to work. No more begging. No more pity. No more judgment.

The power that Jesus has to restore the leper is available to us. Sin can be forgiven. Our past pain can be healed. Our shame can be taken away. A new life awaits those who come to Jesus. Just humbly come to Jesus and share your need.

Following the miraculous healing, Jesus strongly warns the leper to keep the healing a secret and present himself to the priest. After the most amazing miracle, a man's whole life has been transformed and Jesus asks him to keep it quiet. You cannot blame the leper for disobeying Jesus and speaking out with joy the good news of his new life.

Why would Jesus command the leper to keep the miracle to himself and instead go to the priest? Jesus wanted the healed man to present himself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that go along with a healing of leprosy. Once the priest looked him over, he

would be declared clean and allowed back into society. Another reason Jesus wanted him to follow through was according to verse 44, “a testimony to them.” “Them” is referring to the priests. The leper’s healing was to be a testimony to the priests that the Messiah is here.

When John the Baptist was in prison he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if He was the Messiah. This is what Jesus said in response, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”  
Mark 11:4-5

Jesus wanted the priests to be confronted with the truth that a leper was healed by Him. Either they believed it or were held accountable for their unbelief.

We don’t know if the man finally reported to a priest. But the text says the result of his sharing created problems for Jesus. Jesus was bombarded with people and could not preach in the synagogues. Instead, verse 45 says that Jesus “Could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places.”

Do you see the irony in this? The leper was free to enter any town but Jesus could no longer. Jesus was now the one at the outskirts of the towns and cities.

What can we take away from this encounter between Jesus and the leper?

First,

**You were a spiritual leper before accepting Christ.**

Because of our sins, we were unclean and had to live outside the camp of God. We were unable to enter the city of God- heaven. There was nothing humanly possible we could do to become clean and in right standing to enter heaven. We were destined to be separated from God for eternity. We were hopeless.

This reality is what made my situation very similar to the men at the Eugene Mission that day. We were all broken and in need of a Savior.

Jesus left heaven and came to earth in order to rescue us from our sins and destiny separated from Him. Hebrews 13:12–13 (ESV), “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.”

We met Jesus outside the camp. We surrendered our lives to Him and He cleansed and sanctified us so that we could be declared clean and invited into eternity in heaven.

Second, **God calls us to introduce spiritual lepers to Jesus.**

Spiritual lepers don't have the opportunity to physically come up to Jesus and ask to be healed because Jesus is physically waiting in heaven to return one day. So Jesus gives us the privilege and responsibility to introduce others to the one who healed us.

What did the leper naturally do after being healed? He told anyone who would listen what Jesus did in his life.

- It is natural to talk about someone who has made such an impact on your life.
- It is natural to want to tell others about the changes that have occurred since your encounter with Jesus.
- It is **not** natural to force people to listen to you share about your life.
- It is natural to ask for permission to share about this great hope that you have.

Who do you know that is feeling like an outcast or feeling hopeless? Who do you know that hasn't been introduced to Jesus? Who do you know that doesn't have a church family to receive support and grow in understanding God and themselves?

If you have no one in your circle of influence that does not know Christ or are feeling hopeless then ask the Lord to direct you to people who need His healing touch.

Third,

**Jesus separates Himself from all others religions.**

A religion is only as good as the founder of it. Jesus is unlike any other founder. There is no comparison between His power and His compassion. There is no comparison in how he deals with those who are suffering.

Dr. Paul Brand saw how other religions dealt with suffering while living in India. He wrote, “Buddhists taught a serene acceptance of suffering...Hindus and Muslims often faced suffering with a spirit of fatalism: to the Hindu it results from sins of a former life, and is the will of Allah to the Muslim.

In contrast, Christianity has traditionally responded with the paradox modeled by Jesus: we must trust the goodness of God despite suffering and injustice we see around us, and yet do all we can to relieve it during our days on earth.”

Fourth,

**If you are hurting you can come to Jesus.**

We live in a day where we have medical specialists. If you are having back issues you go to a back doctor. If you have feet issues you go to a pediatrist.

Jesus is a specialist in all areas of life. He is a specialist in dealing with painful emotions, hurting bodies, broken relationships, shattered dreams, sinful habits, wrongful thinking. Whatever area is in need of fixing, Jesus can help you. The question is: are you willing to be healed?

The leper knew Jesus had the power to heal Him but wondered if He would want to. For us, Jesus has the power to change our lives. The question is: do you want Him to heal you in that area? Are you willing to give it up? Are you willing to say, “I give it to you Jesus and choose to follow You?”

Jesus does not turn away from us when we come to Him with our sickness and sin. He will **never shun us**. He knows exactly how that feels. He has experienced rejection, denial, hatred, abuse. So when we come to Him with our hurts and pain He has compassion. No matter what you have done or was done to you Jesus will welcome you and not turn away. He will heal and cleanse you. Just come to Him.

Let's pray

o.b.g.