The Servant’s Power Over The Unclean
Mark 1:40-45

Introduction

Mark’s attention turns to the healing of a man with leprosy. The story begins with tears (v.40) and continues with a touch (v.41) and ends with a testimony (vv.43-45).

Jesus: The Hope Of The Unclean (v.40)

Mark 1:40 (NKJV) 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.

Luke 5:12 (NKJV) 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.

Dr. Luke provides a medical perspective; pleres lepras “full of leprosy”. Advanced, fatal. We have every reason to believe the man was covered with the dreadful disease.

American Leprosy Missions reports:
Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is still a cruel reality in developing countries. This ancient disease is still a major world health problem; every two minutes someone is diagnosed with leprosy.

Leprosy Statistics
• 141 countries reported leprosy in 2009.
• Nearly 250,000 new cases are diagnosed every year, and many more go undetected. Approximately 10% of these new cases are in children.
• 3 to 4 million people have disabilities as a result of leprosy.
• 16 countries in Africa, Asia and South American accounted for 93% of all new cases detected in 2009.

The bacteria attack nerve endings and destroy the body's ability to feel pain and injury. Without feeling pain, people injure themselves and the injuries can become infected, resulting in tissue loss. Fingers and toes become shortened and deformed as the cartilage is absorbed into the body. Repeated injury and infection of numb areas in the fingers or toes can cause the bones to shorten. The tissues around them shrink, making them short.

Early signs include spots on the skin that may be slightly red, darker or lighter than normal skin. The spots may also become numb and have lost hair. Often they appear on the arms, legs or back. Sometimes the only sign may be numbness in a finger or toe. If left untreated, hands can become numb and small muscles are paralyzed, leading to curling of the fingers and thumb. When leprosy attacks nerves in the legs, it interrupts communication of sensation in the feet. The feet can then be damaged by untended wounds and infection. If the facial nerve is affected, a person loses the blinking reflex of the eye, which can eventually lead to dryness, ulceration and
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blindness. Bacteria entering the mucous lining of the nose can lead to internal damage and scarring which in time causes the nose to collapse. Untreated, leprosy can cause deformity, crippling and blindness (www.leprosy.org).

“No other disease reduces a human being for so many years to so hideous a wreck” (E.W.G. Masterman). Josephus reports from the first century AD: “[Lepers are treated] as if they were, in effect, dead men.”

We are not told the man’s name or past. We are not told if he had a wife and children. We are not told if he was part of a leper’s colony. In ancient Israel if a man or a woman had a suspicious spot, or a white patch of skin, they were required by the Levitical Law to present themselves to the priest. In ancient times the priest also served as a public health official.

The disease begins as discoloration. The white spots become nodules which grow and begin to ooze fluid. The Law required the man be quarantined for two weeks (14 days); in which the Priest made a determination if the man was infected. If the news was “you have leprosy” it was a death sentence. The man could not touch his wife or children. You could not touch anyone. A legal restraining order was issued. You were sent to a leper colony to die. The average life-span for the person with leprosy has been calculated at about 9 years. Loved ones would leave food at a safe distance of about 100 feet with little notes or written messages.

As the disease progresses, sores cover the whole body, ulcerations, blood, then damaged feet and toes become infected. Lepers soon emit a foul stench so profound you can taste it in your mouth. Rodents would sometimes feed on the decomposing flesh of the poor victims. You were absolutely forbidden to sit or rest on a rock where the public travelled. You could not drink from a public well or fountain or stream. The voice would become raspy and harsh; you were isolated, exiled, despised.

Some lepers could be declared “clean” if they were completely covered with the white discoloration but were no longer in danger of infecting anyone else. Did the man scream “unclean” “unclean” and part the crowd? The man heard about Jesus and “saw Jesus” (Luke 5:12) and “came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling to Him, and saying to Him, “If you are willing, You can make me clean”. The tax collector Matthew provides the information that the leper found Jesus on the overlook near Capernaum that has come to be called the Mount of Beatitudes; where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.8:1-4). Is it possible this man heard Jesus preach and his heart began to burn with the possibility that Jesus could help him, perhaps even cure him? In three gospels we are shown the intensity of the man’s actions; Mark records that he knelt down; Luke says he fell on his face (Luke 5:12) and Matthew says that he worshipped Jesus (Matt. 8:2).

There was no known cure for leprosy. Leprosy usually meant permanent exclusion and isolation.
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No wonder leprosy is used as type and picture of sin. Sin starts as a blotch, a discoloration, and soon infects its host. The Bible teaches that sin infects and then consumes. If leprosy is a picture of sin; the miracle is a powerful statement of the power of Jesus to deliver from sin. Leprosy like sin insidious, slow, destructive, brings ultimate ruin.

Mark 2:17 (NKJV) When Jesus heard it, He said to them, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.

In 1982, “ABC Evening News” reported on an unusual work of modern art—a chair affixed to a shotgun. It was to be viewed by sitting in the chair and looking directly into the gun-barrel. The gun was loaded and set on a timer to fire at an undetermined moment within the next hundred years. The amazing thing was that people waited in lines to sit and stare into the shell’s path! They all knew the gun could go off at point-blank range at any moment, but they were gambling that the fatal blast wouldn’t happen during THEIR minute in the chair. Yes, it was foolhardy, yet many people who wouldn’t dream of sitting in that chair live a lifetime gambling that they can get away with sin. Foolishly they ignore the risk until the inevitable self-destruction.

What can we learn from the cleansing of the leper?
We may be able to glean some principles in prayer.
Do you think it is safe to say the man with leprosy did not underestimate the severity of his problem? Do you think it is safe to say the man was serious even desperate?
“imploring” or “beseeching” or “begging” (v.40a).
The man was worshipful, reverent “kneeling down to him” (v.40b)
The man was humble and submissive “If you are willing” (v.40c)
The man believed “You can” (v.40d)
The man admitted his need “you can make me clean”.
The man was specific--not bless me but “make me clean”.

Does that describe your prayers? Desperate, reverent, humble, believing, confessing, specific?
We might even add personal; “make ME clean” and brief, five words in the original language.

Heal a leper? Impossible.
Save a sinner? Impossible. . .unless . .
Jesus loved those who came to Him in sincerity, in desperation, with an impossible, incurable condition. Jesus loves those who come to Him by faith, in confidence--believing Him! There seems to be two principles that run through the Scriptures; (1) to faith He adds more faith and (2) to unbelief and hardness of heart He adds more hardness.

Jesus: His Compassion For The Unclean (vv.41-42)

Mark 1:41 (NKJV) Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, I am willing; be cleansed.
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Note three things; the compassion, the touch, the word.
The misery of the leper is eclipsed by the mercy of the Lord.
The man is prostrate before the Great Physician.

Jesus is motivated by compassion. Some manuscripts read; “moved with anger”. If that’s the case Jesus is angered by the horrors sin brings. Since the diseased was so advanced it had probably been years since he had experienced the touch of a “clean” person. Touch was limited to those who had the dread disease.

The compassion of Jesus is linked to the sufferers’ affliction.
Henry Ward Beecher wrote . . . “Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation”. Blame or self blame is easier to generate than compassion. Anyone can criticize. In James we read ‘The Lord is full of compassion and mercy’ (5:11). Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).

The leper was surrounded by people who loathed him and feared him. Snow white. Covered in corruption. No value to society. A drain on others generosity. Some have suggested that Jesus was not breaking the Law if the period of contagion had passed. Others have suggested that the moment Jesus purposed to touch the Leper he was in fact healed!

Compassion, touch, speech. Misery, mercy, ministry.
Warren and David Wiersbe in their book “Making Sense of the Ministry” list the marks of a true ministry;

> The foundation of ministry is character.
> The nature of ministry is service.
> The motive for ministry is love.
> The measure of ministry is sacrifice.
> The authority of ministry is submission.
> The purpose of ministry is the glory of God.
> The tools of ministry are the Word of God and prayer.
> The privilege of ministry is growth.
> The power of ministry is the the Holy Spirit,
> and the model for ministry is Jesus Christ.

Mark 1:42 (NKJV) As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.

The Bible uses the dramatic and profound word “cleansed”. Lepers were not simply healed; they were cleansed!

Jesus: His Charge To The Unclean (vv.43-45)
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*Mark 1:43 (NKJV) And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once,*

The expression “strictly warned” sounds severe but is even more severe in the original language; *embrimesamenos; in classical Greek it was the snorting of an animal. The NIV translates this “and Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning.”*

In the Bible Jesus will sometimes say, “Tell everyone” and we tell no one.

*Mark 1:44 (NKJV) 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.*

Why did Jesus insist the former leper present himself to the priest? The text tells us. “as a testimony to them”. Jesus is concerned about health as well as holiness.

The man needed to observe the Law. And the man needed to provide a testimony to the priest and the people. The man’s cleansing needed to be acknowledged by the priests in order to be allowed back into fellowship with the people. The people would not be willing to accept him until he was pronounced clean. There is another reason; the healing would testify to the priest and the religious leaders to the divine power of the Lord Jesus Christ. The moment the priest declared the man cleansed, healed, he would be declaring Jesus to be the Son of God and the Messiah (Lev. 14:2-20).

What was the man’s reluctance to obey the Lord?
The procedure for cleansing was outlined in Leviticus 14. In Leviticus 13 we get a picture of the characteristics of sin. The disease of leprosy goes below the surface of the skin (v.3); it spreads (v.7); it defiles (vv.44-46); it isolates (v.46), it destines things for the fire (v.52). All garments found defiled by leprosy were immediately burned. People may laugh at sin, excuse sin, or try to explain it away. In chapter 14 the priest goes to the leper (the leper cannot go to the priest, the leper lives outside the camp). Jesus left the camp of heaven to find sinners so that we could be saved. The priest would offer sacrifices (14:4-7). The ceremony is a picture of the work of Jesus Christ. The priest would take one of two birds and place it in an earthen vessel (clay jar); and then he killed the bird. Birds were not created to live in clay jars, earthen vessels or BBQ grills! They were created to soar in the heavens! Jesus left heaven and voluntarily confines Himself to an earthen vessel. He will die. The bird was killed over running water; a picture of the cleansing of the Holy Spirit. The priest then took the living bird, dipped the bird in the blood of its dead partner; and set the bird free! What a picture of the resurrection and freedom! Jesus died for our sins. He took the blood (in a spiritual sense) back to heaven so that we might be cleansed from sin! The priest finally sprinkled some of the blood on the leper, for “without the shedding of blood there is no remission for sin (Heb. 9:22 NKJV).
According to Leviticus 14:8-9 the priest pronounces the leper clean; in the sense he is clean before God; but now he must make himself ritually clean; the washing is a picture of the believer cleansing himself from the filthiness of the flesh and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1). We are saved. We live like saved people. We desire to live holy and blameless lives for Christ’s sake. In the text the leper waits until the eighth day; eight is the number of resurrection, the new beginning! The former leper returns to the camp to offer sacrifices (vv.10-13). The former leper would offer a trespass offering, a sin offering, and a burnt offering. The sin offering took care of his defilement, the burnt offering represented his renewed dedication to the Lord; why the trespass offering? Because while he lived in a state of defilement, he was unable to serve the Lord as he should, and therefore owed God great debt. The trespass offering was God’s way to repair the damage done by that wasted portion of his life! Every lost sinner is not simply lost; but robbing God of the honor due God; and each day the debt grows larger! At the end of the ceremony the priest applies the blood and the oil (vv.14-20). The priest took the blood and applied it to the right ear, and the right thumb, and the right great toe of the man; this symbolized the whole body had now been purchased and belonged to God. He was to listen to God’s Word, and work for God’s glory, and walk in God’s ways (see Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on this chapter p.152).

Wiersbe’s outlines: Then the priest put the oil on the blood, symbolizing the power of the Spirit of God for the doing of God’s will. The blood could not be put on the oil; the oil had to be put on the blood. For where the blood has been applied, the Spirit of God can work. The rest of the oil was poured on the man’s head, and thus, he was anointed for his new life. If you will read Lev. 8:22-24, you will see that a similar ceremony was performed for the consecration of the priests. In other words, God treated the leper as he would a priest” (see p. 152).

The chapter is a picture of what Jesus does; He goes outside the camp to find us, He dies and rises from the dead to save us; he applies the blood and the oil to our lives so we can experience friendship and fellowship with God. Hear the words of the leper, “If you are willing, You can make me clean”. Leviticus 14 was God’s answer to the question hundreds of years earlier. No priest could make the leper clean. The law and the priests were powerless to help the man.

The misery of the man, and the miracle for the man, was prophesied by the ministry of the law! There is a disease that leads to death; and there is a desire that leads to deliverance; and there is a disobedience that leads to difficulty.

Mark 1:45 (NKJV) 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.

The man’s disobedience to Jesus proved to be harmful to Christ. The expression “proclaim it freely” is the same root word for “preach” kerysso. The man may have thought he was doing Jesus a favor. “Spread the matter” is a single Greek word (a long Greek word diaphemizo) spread the news about or spread widely or disseminate. The cleansed leper turned into a powerful publicist; but
it was unwelcome publicity. When we chose to disobey Jesus we hinder or hurt the ultimate ministry of Jesus. Jesus could no longer openly enter the city (it means he had to sneak in!). Jesus conducted his ministry in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction.

Most people will never read the Leviticus 13 or 14. Most people will not read the Bible.

The Christian’s life is the world’s Bible.

Conclusion

In a *Newsweek Poll: Most Americans Believe in Miracles (Newsweek May 1, 2000)*

- Percentage of Americans who believe in divine miracles: 84%
- Percentage who believe in the reality of miracles described in the Bible: 79%
- Percentage who have personal experiences with miracles: 48%
- Percentage who know people who have: 63%
- Percentage who have prayed for a miracle: 67%
- Percentage who believe God or the saints cure or heal sick people who have been given no chance of survival by medical doctors: 77%

The study didn’t ask; “Why do you suppose Jesus did miracles?” Compassion? To prove His credentials? To convey His power?” The miracle of Jesus was in part meant to send a message, what Jesus can do in the physical realm, He can certainly do in the spiritual realm. If Jesus can cleanse leprosy, Jesus can cleanse sin!

We serve a God who is more concerned about our eternal needs than our temporary condition. Yet we serve a God filled with compassion, overflowing with grace, abounding in mercy. The misery of the leper reveals the mercy of the Lord. But the ministry of the Law, the Bible the Word of God reveals that God can and will heal and cleanse man’s most pressing problem; sin.

Your misery will never exceed Christ’s mercy. Your condition will never intimidate or aggrieve or denigrate Christ’s compassion. Are you sinner? Do you want forgiveness? Do you believe Jesus loves you, that He died on the cross for your sins and is willing to forgive you? Are you willing to confess your sins and receive forgiveness and hope, salvation and life?