

TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHABLE!

www.thebiblejesus.com

And look! A leper came to him and bowed low to him, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, you are able to make me clean." And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing! Be clean!" And immediately his leprosy was made clean (Matthew 8: 2-3).

Every time I read this story I get goose bumps. For some reason it always inspires me with renewed faith in my daily walk with the Lord Jesus. I hope it does the same for you too.

THE SETTING

The healing of the leprous man is recounted in all three Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1: 40-45; Luke 5: 12-16 and Matthew 8: 1-4). It took place not long after Jesus had come down from the mount having delivered his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 8: 1).

Doctor Luke alone informs us that this leper who came kneeling before Jesus was full of leprosy (Lk. 5: 12 KJV). Modern translations capture the idea by saying he was covered with leprosy.

Nowadays we understand leprosy to be a specific disease known as Hansen's disease (HD). It's caused by the bacteria *Myobacterium Leprae* which produces long-term infection with hideous symptoms. It often begins with little nodules that go on to ulcerate the entire body with foul discharge.

After the initial nerve and skin damage, the hands and feet lose sensation, the tendons contract, and fingers and toes begin to drop off --- sometimes ears and noses. Over the years it's death by inches!



To be a leper in Bible times was interpreted as being under a curse from God (remember Miriam's curse in Numbers 12: 10,12 ?).

The Law of Moses stipulated that anybody found leprous was to be removed from society. And it goes without saying that a leprous person was forbidden to enter the Temple, or indeed Jerusalem.

Certainly no Jewish rabbi would be seen anywhere near a leper. After all, the Law stipulated that defilement from a leper was second only to that from a corpse. *If a leper so much as put his head into a house, that house became unclean even to the roof and beams. Even in an open place it was illegal to greet a leper ... One Rabbi would not even eat an egg bought in a street where a leper had passed by. Another Rabbi actually boasted that he flung stones at lepers to keep them away. Other Rabbis hid themselves, or took to their heels, at the sight of a leper even in the distance.* (¹)

So, a diagnosis of leprosy was not only a physical death sentence, but a death knell socially. Driven out from your home, your family, your friends, all forms of worship and religious fellowship --- everything near and dear to you --- your world and security were gone.

The leper who sought Jesus would have presented a ghastly spectacle, being *full of leprosy*. Certainly the crowds following Jesus would have given him a wide berth. Unlike the rabbis though, Jesus did not take to his heels or throw stones at the man! He reached out his hand and *touch*ed him!

So, what prompted this particular leprous man to risk coming to Jesus? He had probably been living in a lepers' colony, where all the "cursed" social rejects lived. And, according to the requirements of convention, he had to announce his condition loudly whenever he approached 'normal' folks. He had to cry out, "*Leper! Unclean!*" (*Lev. 13:45-46*)! Everybody would have been aghast and scrambled to keep their social distance.

This leper was breaking the quarantine rules! So, what brought this physical and social wreck of a man out on his risky mission? To this point Jesus is said to have cured *various diseases, those suffering from pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed*, but lepers are not mentioned in that number (*Matt. 4: 23-24*).

Healings of leprosy were rare, to the point where they were considered almost as impossible as raising the dead (see for example, *2 Kings 5: 7, 14*). And we know Jesus had not yet raised any dead people. So, what had stirred this leper's faith and courage to be the first of his kind to come to Jesus?

As always, faith comes by hearing. And no doubt, this was our leper's case. The recent reports of Jesus' healings and powerful teaching stirred up hope and faith within his desperate, lonely soul. Something in those reports drew the leper to Jesus. I think he recognised in Jesus Israel's Messiah.

The rabbis taught that in the Messianic Age to come there would be no leprosy. So, by coming to Jesus, this leper was really testifying that he believed Jesus' Gospel-word that the long-awaited Kingdom of God was dawning.

¹ William Barclay, *Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible*, The Saint Andrew Press, Scotland, 7th Impression 1968, pp 301-302

So, the leper came kneeling before Jesus, which is to say he came respectfully (²). Perhaps he had heard Jesus' promise, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"? Perhaps he had heard that those who mourn will be comforted? He knew he had no claim on Jesus, but he knew he was broken needing a touch of mercy.

He addressed Jesus as "Lord". The modern equivalent is "Sir", as indeed, many modern translations render it. (³)

The leper's kneeling before Jesus and his calling Jesus 'lord' or 'sir' does not mean he was confessing what the later Church Councils decreed. It does not mean this leper knew Jesus to be the Lord God incarnated and that he was worshipping him as such. That is to rip the story out of its context and to rob it of any historical authenticity.

Notice the leper does not even make a request. He simply states, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean". The request is implied both in the man's condition and in his confidence in Jesus' power to heal. (⁴)

I think this is fairly typical of most Christians' faith. Like me, you probably find it easier to believe that God is able to do all things, rather than to believe He is willing to answer your prayers? After all, the Bible is full of amazing displays of God's omnipotence, starting with bringing the cosmos into being by His word of command. But will He bring that power to bear in my need?

Believing God has the power is not the challenge. The question when faced with our own impossibilities is, **will** He intervene for my need? **Will** He exercise that power to intervene for "little old me" in my circumstances? There's not as much of a challenge believing generally in His power as there is in believing He is willing to touch me, to speak his word of deliverance to me.

NAME IT AND CLAIM IT?

Before moving on, I can't help but contrast this man's respectful non-presumptive approach to the attitude of some sections of the modern faith-healing movement. Some so-called faith-healers teach it's God's will to heal everybody, to prosper everybody with wealth, if only they will have the faith to receive it. They say, "All things are possible to the one who believes. So, name your blessing, claim it, and go on your way believing you already have it." (⁵)

² The Greek word *προσκύνησις* (*proskyneō*) may be translated, to worship, to prostrate, to kneel, to bow before, to do obeisance to.

³ In the NT the title 'lord' is attributed to anybody from the gardener to God, so only context will determine each case. Mary at first believed the risen Christ was the gardener and addressed him as 'lord' (John 20:15).

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992, p189

⁵ I have dealt with this question more fully in my series on [Charismatic Questions Answered](#). See especially the first three articles.

The question of healing in individual circumstances is a lot more nuanced than this. Each case must be individually brought before the Lord God to determine His mind. I think as a general principle though, we may say that it is God's will that His people be well and healthy. As a general rule it is not God's will that His people be sick and weak, or as the British folk are apt to say, be poorly.

THE POWER OF A TOUCH

Jesus could have healed this leper with a spoken word alone. But, **he reached out his hand and touched the man.** "I am willing," he said, "Be clean!"

Commentators have pondered over the significance of Jesus' outstretched hand. Some have argued this symbolises the exercise of authority. They appeal to OT passages such as **Exodus 7:5** where, speaking metaphorically God says, "**the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.**"

A few chapters later Moses himself **stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land (Ex. 14: 21).** And in the victory song in **Exodus 15** the Israelites sing praise to God because, **Your right hand, O LORD, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O LORD shattered the enemy (v. 6).**

I am prepared to admit there may be an element of truth in this view, however a major problem for it is that Matthew uses the same expression elsewhere where it's impossible to give it this significance (e.g. in **12: 13; 49; 14: 31; 26: 51**) . (⁶)

No. Given all we know about this leper's tragic condition, surely we must see in Jesus' outstretched hand to touch the man, all the compassion of Jesus for the man. Mark states this clearly --- **Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man (Mk. 1: 41).** It was compassion that touched the untouchable!

The Law of Moses forbade touching an unclean leper (**Lev. 5: 3**). Certainly, no Law-observant Jew would have been within spitting distance of this leper! (⁷) Perhaps, as other commentators suggest, Jesus' touch was also meant to convey that he was greater than the ceremonial Law of Moses? Was he demonstrating that he could touch the unclean and not become defiled himself?

After years of social isolation, can you imagine what this simple gesture from Jesus must have communicated to his lonely, breaking heart? The leper was kneeling before Jesus. He dared come no closer ... other rabbis more than likely had thrown stones at him. But, in total contrast, Jesus **reached out his hand and touched the man.** What grace. What tenderness. What compassion. What love. But of course, this is not all.

⁶ Leon Morris calls this interpretation of Jesus' touch as symbolising authority, "fanciful". *Op Cit.* p 236

⁷ When I was training as an ambulance paramedic in the very early days when the AIDS 'plague' was frightening everybody because of its unknown aetiology, every health-care worker in contact with an AIDS patient had to gown up, mask up, glove up. We looked like we had just landed from outer space! These days such images are with us every day with Covid, of course.

THE TWO WORDS THAT CHANGED HIM FOREVER.

In the Greek text Jesus spoke just two words which is impossible to do in English. The first word cleared up the matter of Jesus' will, "I am willing." (⁸) The second word brought the power to heal the leprosy. It is a word of command ... "You be clean!" (⁹)

We are told that the cure was instantaneous ... **immediately he was cured of his leprosy (Matt. 8: 3)**. Actually, the more accurate translation is that the man was **cleansed**. (¹⁰) Personally, I like "cleansed" better because to me it conveys not just that the man's physical ailment of leprosy was healed, but that all his emotional baggage was also removed. His defilement was cured. Truly, it was as though a dead man had been raised to new life.

GO AND SHOW BUT DON'T TELL ANYONE!

However, a critical part of the leper's healing was still to be dealt with. To restore him completely to that society Jesus commands the man, "**See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them**" (Matt. 8: 4).

Jesus did not want the miracle being blabbed all over the country. (¹¹) His command to the leper is very strong and the [Living Bible](#) brings this element out beautifully, "**Don't stop to talk to anyone.**" Now that was quite a challenge, and not just because the offering he must bring could only be offered in the Temple in Jerusalem --- a reasonable journey for him.

We all know what it's like trying to keep the best news to ourselves, and the man's heart was obviously bursting full with joy. He's just got his whole life back! And he goes off, I imagine, walking and leaping and praising God and spouting forth to all and sundry.

So *why* does Jesus insist on total silence until he gets to the priests in Jerusalem? And don't forget there was a huge crowd following Jesus at the time anyway (Matt. 8: 1). Word was going to spread quickly one way or another anyhow. This Rabbi *touches* lepers! This Rabbi *cleanses lepers!*

Some commentators suggest Jesus did not want to be considered just a miracle worker, but I find this inept because, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus must establish his messianic credentials. The Messiah must do what the Messiah is predicted to do!

Others suggest that Jesus knew adoration from the crowds following him would bring him into conflict with the authorities way too soon. Remember that Israel was an occupied country. Wild talk of the Messiah, the expected king of Israel, was political dynamite.

⁸ Θέλω (*thelō*)

⁹ καθαρίσθητι ... an aorist passive imperative second person singular.

¹⁰ From καθαρίζω (*katharizō*) from which our English word "catharsis" derives, meaning a cleansing.

¹¹ Jesus often requested this ... Matt. 9: 30; 12: 16; 16: 20; 17: 9, etc.

Before the inevitable confrontation with the powers of Rome and Jerusalem, Jesus needed more time to appeal to the nation, more time to educate his disciples, more time to educate men's minds about the true nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was not about to tempt the LORD his God by unnecessary foolhardy disregard for common sense! There is a real kernel of truth in this explanation.

The Gospel of Mark does tell us that the healed man did not listen to Jesus: **Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere (Mk. 1: 45).**

How sad that after being touched by Jesus, and after hearing just two words of compassion and power that completely restored his life to wholeness, this leper failed to listen to Jesus. He caused a whole lot of hurt and trouble for the Healer himself. May God give us each one who are saved by His love and power through Jesus Christ our crucified and risen Lord the grace never to harm his Name or His Gospel cause!

Notice the reason why Jesus wants the man to tell no one till he got the certificate of cure from the priests in Jerusalem: **"Show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them"** (Matt. 8: 4). Who is the testimony to benefit? Who is the 'them'?

Some commentators insist that Jesus asked the cleansed leper to follow the Law because Jesus himself needed the Law to confirm his authority. But Jesus did not ever need any man's *imprimatur* --- and certainly not as announced by the corrupt religious establishment in Jerusalem who falsely represented that Law.

Jesus certainly never sought any man's authorisation. He always appealed to his words and works as backed up by his Father as his authority. He knew his authority was directly from the Father who had announced this at his baptism in the Jordan River: **"This is My beloved Son, hear (obey) him!"** Even the apostle Paul said he did not need the authorisation of men (whether apostles of Christ or not!) for his authority to preach the Gospel (**Gal. 1: 10-12; 2:6**).

So, why does Jesus say the leper's official certificate of cleansing will be **a testimony to them**? Who are the others who need a testimony? I think we must always keep in mind the overarching theme of Jesus' life, works and teaching. The focus for Jesus was always the Kingdom of God.

We have already noted the rabbis taught that in the Messianic Age to come there would be no leprosy. So the leper's miraculous cleansing would be a testimony to the Jerusalem authorities that the Messiah really was in their midst. Far from showing Jesus' own allegiance to the Law, the man's healing was primarily a testimony to Jesus' messiahship, that the Kingdom was at hand.

FINALLY, A PRACTICAL LESSON OR TWO

What an encouragement this story is for us today. Firstly, it says there is nobody who is so unclean, so big a failure, so ruined by sinful living who is outside the compassionate touch and cleansing power of the Saviour Jesus Christ.

Oh, let us never let our failures, our sins and yes, our wickedness keep us a moment longer from the arms of a forgiving God. When Jesus touched this untouchable man, we see the heart of God. As the beautiful hymn appeals, **Just as I am, I come! Thy blood can cleanse each spot!**

Another thought. Jesus instructed the man to still go through the process the Law of Moses required. (¹²) I like William Barclay's thought here:-

There is guidance here. Jesus was telling that man not to neglect the treatment that was available for him in those days. We do not receive miracles by neglecting the medical and scientific treatment that are open to us. We must do all man can do before God's power will cooperate with our efforts. A miracle does not come by a lazy waiting upon God to do it all; it comes from the co-operation of the faith-filled effort of man with the illimitable grace of God. (¹³)

Finally, one last thought. Having received the saving mercy of God in Christ Jesus, may we all display our thankful loyalty to our Saviour by doing what he has asked us to do. The leper's disobedience to his Messiah caused a set-back in Jesus' ministry.

Disobedience always brings hurt to the ones we love the most. O Lord, may we never grieve Your dear heart, never grieve your holy Spirit!

¹² **Leviticus 14** outlines the procedure, which involved bird and animal sacrifices, washings, change of clothes and shaving head, eyebrows and beard, anointing with oil and issuing a certificate of complete health.

¹³ *Op Cit.* p 305