

Luke 5.12-16
"I will; Be Clean."

1. The Approach of the Man (verse 12)

"There came a man full of leprosy." And everyone kept their distance..... *Except Jesus.*

In the ancient world, the term "Leprosy" was used to cover a wide range of skin conditions. It was a lot more broad than what we know today as leprosy. Cases ranged from mild to very severe. And it was just as psychologically damaging as it was physically painful.

Because there was a horrible stigma attached to leprosy. So, along with the physical ailment there were the social consequences leprosy brought, *especially* within Israel. As people with leprosy were declared unclean and cast out from society.

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."*

And in order to be reinstated to Israelite society a leper had to be fully healed and go through that elaborate ritual of cleansing, which we just read about in Leviticus 14.

And so, there were also religious and ritual consequences to leprosy. Because since they were *declared* to be *unclean*, they were shut out from Temple worship.

They couldn't participate with God's people in all the rites and ceremonies the Lord instituted for his worship. And in a *culture* where ritual observance was considered *so essential* to one's relationship to God, that would've been horribly crushing.

And so, leprosy was a disease that was terribly demoralizing—*physically, spiritually, socially, and religiously*. And we have to understand

that and keep it in mind in order to *really grasp* just how striking Jesus' encounter with this leprous man is.

Think for a moment about Job. Remember, in the first chapter of Job, Satan took away Job's property and children. But Job didn't curse God. So, *what did Satan do?* He afflicted him with *sores all over his body*. Job 2.4-8:

Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. ⁵ But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." ⁶ And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." ⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸ And Job took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.

Now, notice in that passage how it's *Satan* who *afflicts* Job. *Of course*, he could only do it because God let him do it. But the sores on Job's body were given by Satan's attack.

And there were social consequences for Job, *weren't there?* As after the affliction of his skin, Job's friends became his enemies and accusers—just another source of affliction.

And I bring that up here because I made the point a couple weeks ago, when we looked at the exorcisms and healings in Capernaum earlier in chapter 4, that spiritual oppression and physical sickness are *intimately linked* together in Luke's Gospel.

They're both results of the curse and the oppression that's been brought by mankind's submission to Satan's temptation. And it's that *Kingdom of Satan* Jesus is *casting out* so people can be reconciled to God.

And we saw that in the way Luke described Jesus' casting out of demons and healing sickness in Capernaum. Jesus *rebukes* demons, and he *rebukes* sickness. Demons *depart* from people, and *sicknesses* also depart from people—they both *flee* at Christ's bidding.

And here in this story about the leprous man, we see the same thing happening. As Jesus, with a *word spoken on his own authority*, heals this man of his leprosy. And Luke describes the healing in verse 13 by saying *“the leprosy left him.”*

Now notice, Luke makes a point to say this guy’s *“Full of leprosy.”* You see, he’s emphasizing the stark nature of the disease. It’s a severe case, and it’s at an advanced stage.

So, this guy’s situation’s pretty dire. He’s in constant pain. He’s an outcast to society. He’s barred from Temple worship. I’d imagine it’s been years since he’s felt the embrace of another human being, other than from those suffering from the same condition.

And his disease is both *severe* and *advanced*. It’s pervasive. He’s covered with it. Like Job-- *from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.*

And so, when he sees Jesus—this great teacher of God’s Kingdom, who’s been going around proclaiming liberty from oppression—Luke tells us in verse 12 that he *“Fell on his face and begged him, ‘Lord, if you will, You can make me clean.’”*

Notice his devotion. He assumes a posture of worship. And he expresses supreme confidence in *Jesus’* power. *“If you should will, You can make me clean.” I know your power.... I believe who you are.... If you simply desire to do this for me.... I know you’re more than able to do it. I lack one thing, and one thing only—knowing whether or not you really want to do it.*

You see, there’s no question here about Jesus’ *ability*. There’s only a question of his mercy and love for this particular man. The guy believes Jesus’ power. But he doesn’t presume to think he has any special claim to Christ’s favor.

Do you ever have times like that? I do. Most of us probably don’t have much trouble with doubting God’s ability. But I suspect the case is different when it comes to his *willingness*. *Do you tend to doubt whether he’s really for you?*

What should you do at those times? Well, you look to Jesus. And remember that God's always for you in Christ. And he proved it by his death and resurrection.

Rom. 8.31-32: *"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"*

But that doesn't mean you'll have *immediate release* from suffering. Just as it didn't for Jesus himself. I mean, even the context of those words of Paul has to do with enduring suffering for the sake of Christ.

Sure, Jesus healed this particular man of his leprosy immediately. But that's not generally how he works in our lives. Because it's often the case that the best thing for us is to undergo hardship so that we can become more like Jesus.

2. The Cleansing Touch of Jesus (verses 13-14)

So, this man came to Jesus with the *proper attitude*. Reverently and humbly. And Jesus didn't refuse him. Luke says in verse 13, *"And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.'"*

Now, notice how purposeful that is. *Jesus stretched out his hand*. He made the conscious decision to embrace this man. Mark's version says the same thing, and adds that Jesus was at this point *"moved with compassion."*

You see, this is a *deliberate* touching of a leprous man. *That's something you just didn't do!* But Jesus breaks through the stigma and social barriers created by this man's oppression. Because he's *moved with compassion* for him.

How long has it been since anyone's touched this man with compassion? How lonely was he? How estranged from his neighbors? And how far did he feel himself to be from God?

But with a touch of his *outstretched* hand, and a word, Jesus brings reconciliation and restoration.

And this is a foreshadowing of the ultimate reconciliation that'll take place in the cross. As Jesus will undergo a cursed death, cut off from the living, *so that* those who are separated from God because of their uncleanness might be brought near to God and united into one body.

And so what we have here is a beautiful picture of the exchange of our sin and corruption for Jesus' righteousness and life.

As the undefiled, spotless, majestic Son of God *came down* to his *sinful, corrupted, defiled* creatures, took our form, and gave himself over to our violence so that we might be made clean—reconciled with God and with each other.

You see, much more than just reaching out his hand to us, he entered into our very nature and subjected himself to all our filth and mockery. That's why he came. That was his mission.

But what about us? Are you willing to be like him? *Are you willing* to get dirty? To touch the untouchable? To risk defilement in order to cleanse another person?

Have you ever had a time when you saw someone. Someone really in need. Someone really dirty. Someone who looks.... risky? And you have this inner-conflict. *Should I... Or shouldn't I?*

What did you do? What would you do? Well thanks be to God that Jesus our Lord didn't shy away from the dirt. From the stink. From the risk of reaching out in love to the unlovely.

What would be the equivalent of a leper in conservative Christian circles? People with great stigma placed on them? The *Homeless? Homosexuals? Pedophiles?*

Now, I know it's hard. But think about it. If someone like that were to come to this church to find healing, *what would our reaction be? Would we turn away? Or would we stretch out our hand in love?*

You see, it's our calling to bring the mercy and love of Christ to everyone who comes broken for healing. That's part of what it means to leave everything and follow Jesus.

We need to *leave behind* that mindset we all innately have that some people *just aren't worth it!* That some sorts of people are just hopeless and lost. We need to *leave behind* our tendency to favor certain people over others.

Friends, truly loving other people is hard. If you have an easy time with it, there's a good chance you're *not really* doing it.

It'll bring discomfort. Sometimes it'll get you weird stares from people. It'll have you associating with and touching people you'd normally want nothing to do with.

That's love. It's often risky. It can be dirty. It can smell really bad.... But in *reality* it's sweet.

Because just as love himself entered into the filth of our world to take our sins and corruption upon himself, so *our love* for him and people is shown by *entering into* the lives of those the world has cast aside, *and* getting dirty with them and for them.

And so, after he stretches out his hand and touches this man, our Lord Jesus says, "*I will. Be clean.*" Four words in English. Two words in Greek. *Infinitely glorious*. Possibly the most wonderful words anyone can ever hear. Ἔλω, καθαρῶσθητι! "*I will. Be clean!*"....

"*And immediately the leprosy left him.*" And so, Jesus demonstrates himself to be *greater* than the Levitical priests. Because he priests didn't have an office of healing. They could only declare people to be clean or unclean upon examination.

But here Jesus *actually heals* the disease. He cleanses this man truly and fully, not just ritually. He shows that he's really a prophet, in the line of Elijah and Elishah, just like he said at the synagogue in Nazareth back at the beginning of chapter 4.

He even pointed to Elisha healing Naaman of leprosy as a precursor to his own ministry.

But Jesus didn't stop with just the healing, did he? In verse 14 he gives him orders to do 2 things. First, he tells him to *not tell anyone*. He did the same thing with the demons earlier toward the end of chapter 4.

But why? I mean, wouldn't Jesus want his fame to keep growing?

Well there are a few possibilities. It's possible he just didn't want rumors to start flying around. It's also possible he didn't want his popularity to get too extreme before the proper time.

But I think the most likely reason he didn't want people to go around talking about the miracles is because the *essence* of his ministry, as we've been seeing, was the *proclamation* of the Kingdom of God.

And so, he didn't want to become known as simply as a wonder-worker. There was a message behind the miracles. And it was that message that was the center of his ministry.

And Jesus performed miracles out of compassion and in order to teach about the Kingdom. *Not* in order to gain recognition for himself. Sure, the recognition would inevitably come. But that wasn't the point of the miracles.

And so, when he healed people, he didn't want them to go around talking to everybody about it. Because that would detract from the message he preached.

And that does seem to be supported by Mark's version of this story. Because Mark adds a detail we don't have in Luke. — This guy actually didn't obey what Jesus said. But he went around telling everybody what happened.

And Mark adds in 1.45 that the result was that: "*Jesus could no longer openly enter a town.*" You see, the more people caught wind of the miracles, the *less freedom* Jesus had to preach openly without distraction.

And the second thing Jesus commanded this man was, "*Go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.*"

We *read* about the offering for ritual cleansing earlier, in Leviticus 14. And by telling this man to observe that law, Jesus shows that, *even though* he was *much greater* than the priests, he didn't want his work to be misunderstood as undercutting the requirements of the Mosaic Law.

This man was a Jew. And he needed to go to the priest with the required offering and be declared ritually clean to be reinstated to Israelite society and Temple worship.

3. Crowds Gather and Jesus Retreats (verses 15-16)

But though Jesus commanded this guy not to tell anyone about his healing, Jesus' fame continued to grow more and more, as we see in v. 15.

But as the crowds got bigger and bigger, and the demands on his time became greater, Luke tells us in v. 16 that Jesus "*would withdraw to desolate places and pray.*" That was his regular practice.

So, at this point we know a few things about the religious life of Jesus. First, we know he regularly attended synagogue worship on the Sabbath. Second, he was regularly out among the people. And third, he also had a habit of withdrawing from the crowds for solitude and prayer.

You see, Jesus was wonderfully balanced. He was *neither* an extrovert *nor* an introvert. But he had all the best qualities of both, without their deficiencies. His engagement with groups of people was always focused. It had purpose. He was always seeking the good.

And his solitude was also focused. It had a purpose. He didn't seek time alone just to veg out. But he sought to commune with his Father.

But, of course, we don't tend to be quite so balanced or purposeful, *do we?* We tend to drift to one extreme or the other.

Now, having either a tendency toward either extroversion or introversion isn't necessarily bad *in itself.* We're all wired in different ways, and we don't have to try to become someone we weren't created to be.

But there's a fine line between your natural created personality, and the sinful defects that bring about imbalance.

And so, something you should always ask about how you spend your time, whether it's alone or with other people, is this: Is there purpose to what you do?

Are you motivated by love for God and your neighbors? And if the answer to either of those questions is no, then something's probably wrong.

*Also, neither the tendency to want to be around crowds of people nor the tendency to want to be alone should ever crowd out the duty to practice the opposite. If you're an extrovert by nature, then you can't use that as an excuse to neglect the *inner life* and the *discipline of solitude*.*

*But on the other hand, if you're an introvert by nature, you can't use that as an excuse to be self-absorbed or aloof. All Christians have the duty to be in regular fellowship with their brothers and sisters and to consistently love their neighbors in tangible ways, *no matter what* your personality may be.*

You see, there's a sort of rhythm in the Christian life between work and rest, and between busyness and solitude. And striking a God-honoring balance between those things isn't easy. It takes thought and work.

And we see that rhythm in the life of Jesus. As he's consistently out among the people—healing, talking, teaching, doing good. But he also consistently retreats for solitude and prayer.

*But in our society, finding time for solitude *isn't so easy is it?* We're always running around like crazy people! And what's more, we have so many toys in our homes and everywhere to distract us.*

*I'm not talking here about solitude *just in the sense* of being apart from the presence of other people. I don't know that many of us have much trouble with that! But I'm talking about being away from the noise—from the voices that stream in upon us from every angle, *crowding* our minds and drowning out God's voice.*

*I mean, you can spend countless hours away from other people and never practice *true* solitude. Because you're always with your i-pad, or your laptop, or the TV, or whatever your device of *preference*.*

So, if you think you don't have enough time to pray, ask yourself what you might be able to cut out in order to make time.

You see, in a culture where we have so many things to distract us, being away from the noise and distraction takes discipline, *doesn't it?* And that's a discipline we need to cultivate.

Because, when it really comes down to it, *brothers* and *sisters*, we're all lepers. Apart from Christ, we're covered head to foot with uncleanness. And our addiction to the noise can shut us off from the healing touch of the God who meets us in the silence.

But Christ has come to us. He's stretched out his arm to cleanse us. *But* there's still that lingering uncleanness, *isn't there?* There are still those *itchy sores* you feel like you need to scratch.

And so we still need to go to Jesus and have him touch us in his mercy, and speak those wonderful words: "*I will. Be Clean.*" So then *let us draw near to him with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.*