

# **To Seek and To Save the Lost**

## **Jesus Cleanses a Leper**

*Luke 5:12-16*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# Jesus Cleanses a Leper

## Scripture

Luke wrote his Gospel so that Theophilus might have certainty concerning the things he had been taught about Jesus (Luke 1:1-4). Luke wanted Theophilus—and others like him—to know for sure that Jesus is the Son of God who had come to seek and to save sinners (Luke 19:10).

Luke recorded 21 miracles by Jesus in his Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Today we will examine the miracle of Jesus healing a leper.

Let's read about Jesus' cleansing of a leper in Luke 5:12-16:

**<sup>12</sup> While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."**

**<sup>13</sup> And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him.**

**<sup>14</sup> And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them."**

**<sup>15</sup> But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. <sup>16</sup> But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. (Luke 5:12-16)**

## Introduction

Five miles off the coast of Cape Town is an island known as Robben Island. Only 3 square miles in size, it once housed a community of lepers. Hundreds of lepers were cared for on Robben Island from 1846 until 1931. The only structure that remains today from that time is a church building. The Church

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<sup>1</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1958.

of the Good Shepherd was built by and for the lepers in 1895. It was difficult for a person with leprosy to get off Robben Island. To be certified to be free of leprosy was virtually impossible.

During Old Testament times it was virtually impossible to be healed of leprosy. However, on those rare occasions when someone was healed of leprosy there was an elaborate and extremely joyful ceremony that extended over eight full days in accordance with the instructions of Leviticus 14.

It began when the person requesting certification of healing would meet the priest beyond the perimeter of the community. The priest would examine the person to verify that he had indeed been healed of leprosy.

Then, still outside the perimeter of the community, two birds were presented along with some cedar wood, scarlet yarn, and hyssop. One of the birds was killed in a clay pot (so that none of its blood was lost). This was done above fresh water (which was symbolic of cleansing).

Next the live bird, along with the wood, yarn, and hyssop, was dipped in the blood. The blood was then sprinkled upon the healed leper seven times, and he was pronounced "clean."

This initial ceremony concluded with the live bird being released in the open fields to wing its way to freedom (vv. 1-7). As a result, the blood-sprinkled person could once again join the community.

This ceremony is a beautiful picture of the effect of Christ's blood, which reconciles a person to God and makes it possible for the sinner to join the community of believers.

After the bird's release the cleansed man washed his clothing, shaved the hair from his body, bathed, and entered the community, where he, his family, and friends rejoiced for seven days (vv. 8-9). On the seventh day his head, eyebrows, and beard were shaved, and he again bathed, so that, like a newborn, he was ready to enter a new phase of his existence.

On the eighth day the former leper offered three unblem-

ished lambs as a guilt offering, a sin offering, and a burnt offering. The guilt offering was not an atoning sacrifice but restitution for the offerings and sacrifices he was unable to make while a leper. His restitution and fresh commitment were then dramatically emphasized when the priest took some of the blood and smeared it on his right ear, thumb, and toe, then coated each smear with a second anointing of oil, thereby symbolizing that the man would listen to God's voice, use his hands for God's glory, and walk in God's ways. Fittingly, his shaved head was then anointed with the remaining oil (vv. 12-18; cf. Exodus 30:23-25). Finally, having thus declared the leper to be in the Lord's service, the priest made atonement for him with sin, burnt, and cereal offerings, the last being a joyous expression of gratitude (Leviticus 14:19-20).

Imagine the joy of the healed man and his family—and the community celebration that accompanied that great eighth day. It was as if a resurrection had taken place.

For Christians, the Old Testament's description of these ancient ceremonies elicits incredible joy because this elaborate ritual speaks of the atonement through Christ and his power to deliver even the most hopeless in our society.<sup>2</sup>

This is precisely what Jesus' cleansing of the leper in Luke 5:12-16 is all about.

## Lesson

The analysis of Jesus' cleansing of a leper in Luke 5:12-16 will teach us how to approach Jesus for cleansing.

### I. Approach Jesus Intentionally (5:12a)

First, approach Jesus intentionally.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 165-166.

In the early chapters of his Gospel, Luke described the ministry of Jesus in the region of Galilee (which is in the northern part of Israel). Jesus had made Capernaum his hometown and base for ministry (Matthew 9:1). From there he travelled to other cities in Galilee to preach about the kingdom of God and how to enter it.

**While Jesus was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy** (5:12a). We don't know the name of the city. All we are told is that **a man** came to Jesus who was **full of leprosy**. The Greek word for **leprosy** (*lepras*) is a general term for a number of skin conditions. The most severe of those was Hansen's disease, which is leprosy, as it is known today. Luke's description of the man as being **full of leprosy** suggests that he in fact had leprosy in the most extreme sense of the term.<sup>3</sup>

Most of us have seen pictures of people who have been afflicted with leprosy. It is a horrible, frightening, disfiguring disease. We don't have any disease quite like leprosy in our day.

What is important to understand is that leprosy is not a rotting infection as was once commonly thought. In recent years the research of Dr. Paul Brand and others has proven that the disfigurement associated with Hansen's disease comes because the body's warning system of pain is destroyed. The disease brings numbness to the extremities as well as to the ears, eyes, and nose. The deformities that follow comes from incidents such as reaching into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato, or washing one's face with scalding water, or gripping a tool so tightly that the hands become frozen and eventually stumplike.<sup>4</sup>

In Third-World countries, vermin sometimes chew on sleeping lepers without the lepers even knowing it. Dr. Brand, after performing corrective surgery on a leper, would send a

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<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 313.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 32.

cat home with him as normal postoperative procedure. Dr. Brand calls the disease a “painless hell.”<sup>5</sup>

Leviticus 13:45-46 summarized the status of a leper: “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.” We cannot imagine what it was like to live as a leper. If he came close to people, he had to shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” Sometimes his family members would place food for him in certain places so that he could feed himself. Lepers often banded together and lived in remote, out-of-the-way places as outcasts (cf. 2 Kings 7:3; Luke 17:12).

To make matters worse, by Jesus’ time, rabbinical teaching had placed even greater restrictions on lepers. For example, it was illegal to greet a leper. Lepers had to remain at least 6 feet away from a person if they were downwind and 150 feet away if upwind. And if a leper put his head inside a house, the entire house was pronounced unclean!

But the worst part of leprosy was the view that people contracted leprosy because of some great personal sin. This view was understandable because God did afflict some people with leprosy because of their personal sin. We think of people such as Miriam, Gehazi, and Uzziah, for example (cf. Numbers 12:6-10; 2 Kings 5:25-27; 2 Chronicles 26:19). Nevertheless, the reason the vast majority of people contracted leprosy was simply the result of living in a fallen world. In this regard, leprosy was no different than people contracting cancer or lupus or Alzheimer’s disease.

However, even though a leper was not more sinful than anyone else, leprosy did in fact illustrate the effects of sin in our lives. A leper is a physical illustration of us apart from the

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<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 166.

cleansing work of Christ. Just as the disease of leprosy affected every part of the leper, so sin affects every part of us. A leper is cut off from the community and was not allowed to worship God at the temple. Similarly, sin has cut us off from God and from the community of believers.

So, this man, who was **full of leprosy**, must have heard about Jesus and his ability to heal every disease. He heard that Jesus was in a nearby city, and so he made his way to the city. As he approached the city, he would have shouted, “Unclean! Unclean!” He knew that he was not supposed to enter the city, but he also wanted to get to Jesus.

One can picture the people pressing in on one another, listening to Jesus. Then, faintly at first, but growing louder and louder, the people heard the dreaded cry, “Unclean! Unclean!” They looked back, and horror of horrors, a leper was headed toward them! Instantly, they parted, and the leper approached Jesus with great intention. His desperate condition caused him to realize that he was without hope—unless he got to Jesus.

Apart from Jesus, we are all like lepers. We are spiritually unclean and we have no hope for a new life, a new purpose, and a new destiny, apart from Jesus. And if we are to be cleansed, we too must approach Jesus intentionally.

## II. Approach Jesus Reverently (5:12b)

Second, approach Jesus reverently.

Luke said that **when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face** (5:12b). The leper came to Jesus with great reverence. He was not flippant in his approach to Jesus. He prostrated himself before Jesus in an act of worship. Could it be that this person, considered an outcast by society, had come to understand before many others that Jesus really was God in human form?

When we come to Jesus, we must always approach him reverently. We live in a time in which there is far too much fa-

miliarity with God and the things of God.

### III. Approach Jesus Urgently (5:12c)

Third, approach Jesus urgently.

Lying in front of Jesus, the leper **begged him** to cleanse him (5:12c). The leper was an outcast. He was miserable. He was wretched. He had no contact with his family. He was desperate. And his only hope was Jesus. And so he approached Jesus with urgency.

The reason so many people don't know the saving grace of God is because they are comfortable and happy. If they even think about death and life beyond the grave, they have not yet come to the point where they are desperate for answers. And so there is no sense of urgency at all for them. But, if they ever come to the point of wanting to be cleansed, then they must approach Jesus urgently.

### IV. Approach Jesus Humbly (5:12d)

Fourth, approach Jesus humbly.

The leper began his request to Jesus by saying, "**Lord, if you will**" (5:12d). First, notice that the leper calls Jesus "**Lord.**" While this could be something like our modern "Sir," it is also used as an acknowledgement of Jesus' sovereign deity.

And then notice that the leper did not say, "Lord, make me clean." He asked, with great humility, "**If you will.**" The leper made no demands of Jesus, knowing that he had no right to claim anything at all from Jesus. He did not doubt Jesus' ability to heal him, but he was keenly aware of his own unworthiness. And so he humbly requested Jesus to heal him.

When we come to Jesus for cleansing, we must do so with great humility. Jesus owes us nothing. We must simply request him to work in us that which we cannot do for ourselves.



## V. Approach Jesus Believingly (5:12e)

Fifth, approach Jesus believingly.

The leper now made his request of Jesus, “If you will, **you can make me clean**” (5:12e). I want you to notice the carefully chosen words of the leper. He did not ask, “Lord, if you will, you can *heal* me,” but rather, “Lord, if you will, you can make me *clean*.” The leper was acutely aware of his unclean condition. He did not only shout out that he was unclean; he *knew* that he was unclean. He knew that his physical condition was an illustration of his spiritual uncleanness.

Now, sometimes, when we want to have something to eat, for example, we ask, “*Can* I have a hamburger?” instead of asking, “*May* I have a hamburger?” The correct question is the second one because that is a question of *permission*, whereas the first is a question of *ability*.

So I want you to notice how the leper phrased his question to Jesus. He said, “If you will, **you can make me clean**” (5:12e). He knew that Jesus had the ability to make him clean. In other words, he approached Jesus believingly.

When we come to Jesus to be cleansed, we must believe that he has the ability to cleanse us.

## VI. Approach Jesus Expectantly (5:13)

Sixth, approach Jesus expectantly.

Do you know that Jesus never turned anyone away who came to him for cleansing? Everyone who came to Jesus for cleansing was cleansed physically and spiritually.

When the leper came to Jesus for cleansing, Luke tells us that **Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him** (5:13).

Don't miss what Jesus did. Jesus **touched him**. In those days it was believed that leprosy was contagious (which is not true), and that is why people never touched lepers. It had been years, perhaps decades, since a non-leprous hand had touched the leper. Perhaps the leper had been married with children. He was not able to feel the embrace of his wife and children for years. How incredibly sad and lonely he was.

Pastor Kent Hughes said that he once counseled a lonely man who had no family that cared about him. He belonged to no church. He said he had his hair cut once a week just so someone would touch him in a caring way. Imagine that leper's longing for a touch or a caress.<sup>6</sup>

But Jesus **touched him**. Why did Jesus touch him? He wanted the leper to *feel* his compassion and willingness to cleanse him. The touch said, "I am willing. I love you. I will cleanse you." And instead of Jesus being contaminated by the man's leprous disease, the man was cleansed by Jesus' power.

But there is also a theological reason. The touch of Jesus on the leper is a picture of Jesus cleansing us of our sin. He took our sin upon himself and gave us his righteousness.

So, when we come to Jesus to be cleansed, we may come expectantly, knowing that he is willing and compassionate.

## VII. Approach Jesus Obediently (5:14-16)

And seventh, approach Jesus obediently.

When we come to Jesus for cleansing, we must be willing to submit to him in obedience for the rest of our lives.

Jesus **charged the leper to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them"** (5:14). Jesus wanted the leper to fulfill the Old Testament law,

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<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 170.

particularly as it applied to the cleansing of lepers. He wanted the priests to confirm that the man was now free of leprosy, and when they were told how it had happened, they would have been told that it was by the power of God through Jesus.

**But** apparently the man could not keep himself from sharing the good news with others, and **now even more the report about Jesus went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear Jesus and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray** (5:15-16). One can hardly blame the man for sharing the news, but he did disobey Jesus' command.

When we come to Jesus for cleansing, we should commit to obeying him fully.

### Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Jesus' cleansing of a leper in Luke 5:12-16, we should take courage in the knowledge that Jesus is still willing to cleanse people today.

Jesus' cleansing of a leper is a picture of how we come to Jesus for spiritual cleansing. Every one of us is a spiritual leper before Jesus. Our spiritual plight and condition is every bit as bad as the leper's physical plight and condition.

So, if we want cleansing for our sin, we must approach Jesus intentionally, reverently, urgently, humbly, believingly, expectantly, and obediently. As we do so, we can be assured that Jesus willingly and compassionately will cleanse us. Amen.



## **Mission Statement**

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## **Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz**

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp)
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## **Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)**

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAYER:**

Thank you Jesus for the account of the time when you cleansed the leper in one of the cities of Galilee. It is a marvelous picture of how you heal not only physical diseases but cleanse spiritual diseases as well.

Enable us to approach you intentionally, reverently, urgently, humbly, believingly, expectantly, and obediently so that we might receive cleansing from you.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!