



[Compassion and Cleanliness—Mark 1:39-45]

In the span of fifteen verse, we encounter Jesus rebuking an unclean spirit, healing Peter's mother in law of fever, curing a multitude of their sickness, driving out many demons, and purifying a man with leprosy. Although the community should celebrate the miraculous power of the Lord, a common theme in the life of Christ is that not everyone welcomes His teaching and activity leading to a plot against his life (Mark 3:6)

Jesus' willingness to touch a man suggests a lack of concern with ritual purity, or at least a deliberate preference for meeting need over ritual correctness

Today we look to our Messiah, his compassion and cleanliness. A feature which links the various stories in this section is the increasing awareness that not everyone welcomes Jesus' teaching and activity, and the section will conclude with the remarkable revelation of a consequent plot on his life in Mark 3:6

Read [Mark 1:39-45]

A Leper's Cry (1:40)

We find Jesus involved in a habitual activity, preaching in the synagogues and driving out demons. It is as if any time the **message of Christ is heard, demons flee**. If demons can not be indifferent when they encounter the Son of God, how much more should we, who he came to save, run to the Throne of mercy? It is at this moment that a man, drawn by the good news, walks up upon the Messiah. But this is no ordinary man. **He is described not by name but by his condition—leprosy**. This man has no name but he has a situation. In an instant, your uncleanness and your situation can define you.

Leprosy We are not told exactly from which condition the man suffers. Scribes counted over 72 different skin afflictions as leprosy. Although not specified, leprosy has often been associated with modern day Hansen's disease—a bacteria that attacks the nerves. If untreated it results in an inability to sense touch and pain.

This was not a common cold. **According to tradition, a person with this disease was among the living dead—an untouchable**. This is not simply the **description of an illness, it is a sentence**. The purpose of which was to protect the health of the community from a dreaded and catastrophic outbreak.

If the personal effect was not enough, the ramifications of contracting leprosy were debilitating. A leper (trying that as a label) would necessarily live outside normal communities. According to law

(Lev. 13:45) Lev. 13:45 “The person who has a case of serious skin disease is to have his clothes torn and his hair hanging loose, and he must cover his mouth and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’⁴⁶ He will remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He must live alone in a place outside the camp.” And must keep a a distance of 50 paces from any passers by.

Because of his affliction this man was physically, socially, and ritually outcast.

The Risk the unnamed man, known today by his disease, defied all traditions and taboos and approaches Jesus within touching distance.

The offense of the disfigured man is immediately apparent. So much so, you can hear **Mark’s original audience gasp** at the blatant disregard for social conventions.

Leprosy was so feared that A lepers entrance into a house or standing under a tree would contaminate this location and those passing by. Nevertheless, this needy man **risks everything**, breaking law and custom, on the **chance of being healed and restored by Jesus of Nazareth.**

What are you willing to risk to be with Jesus?

The Ask If you are willing you can make me clean. Contained within the leper’s plea are the beginnings of faith that Jesus can save him. His faith is revealed by the fact that he does not question Jesus ability to save him only his willingness to save him.

He wants to be *clean* again, the regular term for cure in all gospel passages concerning leprosy. Part of what he is asking is for the disease to go away. But cleanness suggests two changes of state: (1) the healing of a disease and (2) the making of a person ritually pure or acceptable. In essence the man is asking Jesus ‘to heal and to make ritually acceptable.’

Only Jesus can radically restore you. He needed to be healed. Deeper, he needed restoration and to be made acceptable.

A Messiah’s Compassion (1:41)

The Response Jesus not repulsed or even shocked by the leprous man’s advance, is moved. Here is a great reminder of our Savior’s heart to the broken and hurting: He is **moved**. *The Greek word compassion means to be moved as to one’s bowels, hence, to be moved with compassion, have compassion (for the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity) (Thayer).* **The Lord does not look upon those in need with a blind eye.**

External However the response does not end with compassion. Jesus, does something that is **discouraged. He reaches out his hand and touches him.** The response of Jesus is no less scandalous than the leper’s audacity. In the face of such an intrusion, one would expect an observant Jew to recoil in protection and defense. **This is the point where the Torah traditionalist stand up!**

So radical and powerful was this touch that it has captivated artists throughout centuries. Most artists picture Jesus touching the head, lifting the chin, or examining the hands of the deformed man. Today, its depiction decorates the walls of the Sistine chapel.

The outstretched arm of Jesus is a long reach for his day... for any day The touch of Jesus speaks more loudly than his words' and the words of Jesus touch the leper more deeply than any act of human love (Edwards, 70).

This narrative teaches us much about our Savior and those who follow him.

A Christian Community

Jesus was willing to break tradition help the hurting. The man broke traditional laws, really risked everything, for the chance to be changed. What traditional boundaries have you set that prevent you from helping those in need? Jesus has every legal right not to help the leper and yet, he touched him and restored him. If our Savior made himself available to the unclean, how much also should our lives meet the needs of others. When was the last time you said or thought, I would help you but: today's is not a good day, your sin has contributed to your condition, I need to go to church, or I need to keep the traditional requirements. **The Church is a hospital for the saints and sinners not a museum for the Angels.**

Compassion Costs. We see our Savior risking his ritual cleanliness.

Father Damien was a Roman Catholic priest from Belgium and member of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary,[3] a missionary religious institute. He won recognition for his ministry from 1873 to 1889 in the Kingdom of Hawai'i to people with leprosy (also known as Hansen's disease), who were required to live under a government-sanctioned medical quarantine on the island of Moloka'i on the Kalaupapa Peninsula.[4]

During this time, he taught the Catholic faith to the people of Hawaii. Father Damien also cared for the patients himself and established leadership within the community to build houses, schools, roads, hospitals, and churches. He dressed residents' ulcers, built a reservoir, made coffins, dug graves, shared pipes, and ate poi from his hands with them, providing both medical and emotional support.

After eleven years caring for the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of those in the leper colony, Father Damien realized he had also contracted leprosy when he was scalded by hot water and felt no pain. He continued with his work despite the infection but finally succumbed to the disease on 15 April 1889.

Compassion will cost. May we never choose our comfort, our programs, our traditions, over the souls desperately in need.

Truth without compassion is not good news. **Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world (Franciss Schaeffer)** May we never think that because we have good news we have arrived. Good news is meant to be shared. Good news must be shared with compassion.

Love your fellowmen, and cry about them if you cannot bring them to Christ. If you cannot save them, you can weep over them. If you cannot give them a drop of cold water in hell, you can give them your heart's tears while they are still in this body (Spurgeon)

Priests can declare you clean, Jesus makes you clean. Hidden in the narrative is the reminder that tradition and religion can only take you so far. Jesus encourages the man to show himself to the priest as proof. Proof of what? **That Jesus has the power to make you clean.**

You are the Leper. Often when we read this story our hearts are flooded with sympathy for the man. He is sick. He is an outcast. He is an untouchable. He can not see his family and his closest friends. Normally we assume that the leper is a man who is in a bad situation.

6 We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way;
Is. 53:4 Yet he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains; but we in turn regarded him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

Never forget that you are the Leper. When your sin made you untouchable, profaned and unholy, a touch from the Savior, changes everything.

At the end of the story, Jesus is “outside in lonely places.” Jesus and the leper have traded places.

3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like someone people turned away from; he was despised, and we didn't value him.

What a powerful picture of the Gospel

Conclusion

We have a compassionate savior. Those who have been forgiven much, love much. Those who are received compassion, are the most compassionate.

What is keeping you from drawing near to the Lord today?

Heb. 4:16 Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.

He touched me, Oh He touched me
And oh the joy that fills my soul
Something happened and now I know
He touched me and made me whole

Notes

A feature which links the various stories in this section is the increasing awareness that not everyone welcomes Jesus' teaching and activity, and the section will conclude with the remarkable revelation of a consequent plot on his life in Mark 3:6 (NIGTC, 114).

An encounter with a leper raises not only the problem of illness but also that of the Levitical laws of purity. Jesus' willingness to touch a man suggests a lack of concern with ritual purity, or at least a deliberate preference for meeting need over ritual correctness (NIGTC, 116).

Mark 1:39 He went into all of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. 40 Then a man with leprosy came to him and, on his knees, begged him: "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

He Went

Greek indicates the habitual activity into which Jesus now launched, as the next phase of his mission (NIGTC).

Leprosy

This is not simply the description of an illness. It is a sentence, the purpose of which was to protect the health of the community from a dreaded contagion (Edwards, 68).

No indication of place is given, but a leprosy would necessarily be outside normal habitation and indicates that at this point Jesus is preaching outside a township.

Clearly this man has one of the contagious skin diseases in the ANE. Leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases and regarded as practically incurable (NIGTC, 116).

According to law (Lev. 13:45) such a person was to go about crying "unclean unclean" so that no one would approach him and be contaminated (BW, 103).

A man with this disease was among the living dead—untouchable (BW, 103).

Lev. 13:8 And *if* the priest sees that the scab has indeed spread on the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It *is* leprosy.

- The instruction in 13:1–8 provided the proper instruction for a person who developed a swelling, rash (or scab), or bright spot⁹⁴ that might lead to an infectious skin disease (13:2).
- The type of infectious disease is not specified but has often been associated with leprosy (Hansen's disease), since the noun *šāra 'at* was translated *lepra* in the LXX and thus "leprosy" in earlier English translations.
- The term was also defined as "leprosy" by the standard lexicon, BDB. Most modern commentators and lexicographers have abandoned this translation, maintaining that the term refers to a number of infectious diseases.⁹⁶
 - The term would include leprosy, but it should not be restricted to it. The fear of this disease and its devastating effects are well represented in the Old Testament (Num 12:1–15; 2 Sam 3:29; 2 Kgs 7:3–15; 2 Chr 26:20–21).

- The intent of Leviticus 13 was not to correctly diagnose specific dermatological conditions but rather to guide the priests in distinguishing infectious from noninfectious diseases of the skin. No medication was prescribed; the only action that could be taken was quarantine (see 2 Kgs 15:5).
- The person who developed the swelling, the rash, or the bright spot was to be examined by the priests. If the hair on the skin had turned white and the sore was below the surface of the skin, the priest declared the individual ceremonially unclean (13:3).
- If the infection was not below the surface of the skin and the hair had not turned white, the priest was to isolate the infected person for seven days (13:4; see Num 12:15). He was reexamined on the seventh day, and if the situation was unchanged, the priest examined him again after seven more days (13:5). If by this time the infection had abated and had not spread, the individual was pronounced clean (13:6). If the infection spread after he had been pronounced clean, he must appear before the priest again. If the rash appeared again, he was pronounced unclean (13:7–8).
Scribes counted over 72 different skin afflictions as leprosy.

Came/Beg

The leper approached to within touching distance in defiance of the taboo

The offense of the leper's actions are immediately apparent. Lepers were required to stand at a distance (Luke 17:12) of 50 paces. A leper's entrance into a house or standing under a tree would contaminate this location and those passing by (Edwards, 69).

Nevertheless, the leper risks everything, breaking both law and custom, on the chance of being healed and restored by Jesus.

If you are willing

What is noticeable is rather the leper's unquestionable assumption of Jesus' ability to cure his condition (NIGTC, 117).

Contained within the leper's plea are the beginnings of faith that Jesus can save him. His faith is revealed by the fact that he does not question Jesus' ability to save him only his willingness to save him (Edwards, 69).

The leper's longing is profoundly human.

Clean

23.137 καθαριζωc: to heal a person of a disease which has caused ceremonial uncleanness — 'to heal and make ritually pure, to heal and to make ritually acceptable.' εαν θελης δυνασαι με καθαρισαι 'if you want to, you can heal me and make me ritually clean' Mt 8:2. Since καθαριζωc implies **two changes of state**, (1) the healing of a disease and (2) the making of a person ritually pure or acceptable, it may be necessary in some languages, and particularly in certain contexts, to render καθαριζωc in a relatively explicit manner, namely, 'to heal and to make ritually acceptable' or '... ceremonially clean.'

Clean is used consistently as the regular term for cure in all gospel passages concerning leprosy (NIGTC 117).

41 Moved with **compassion**, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. "I am willing," he told him. "Be made clean." 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 Then he sternly warned him and sent him away at once,

Compassion *splagchnistheis*

4697. **σπλαγχνίζομαι; *splangchnizomai***; properly, *to be moved as to one's bowels*, hence, *to be moved with compassion, have compassion* (for the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity) (Thayer)

Touched

This would certainly render Jesus unclean, but the issue of Jesus' view of the Levitical law is not fully broached until Mark 7. What Mark will suggest in chapter 7 is that Jesus believed that with the inbreaking of God's dominion these rules about clean and unclean were obsolescent (BW, 105).

The response of Jesus is no less scandalous than the leper's audacity. In the face of such an intrusion, one would expect an observant Jew to recoil in protection and defense (Edwards, 69).

The outstretched arm of Jesus is a long reach for his day... for any day (Edwards, 69).

The touch of Jesus speaks more loudly than his words' and the words of Jesus touch the leper more deeply than any act of human love (Edwards, 70).

44 telling him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go and show yourself to the priest, and offer what Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." 45 Yet he went out and began to proclaim it widely and to spread the news, with the result that Jesus could no longer enter a town openly. But he was out in deserted places, and they came to him from everywhere.

Go

In this story we see a definite contrast between Jesus, who can make someone clean, and the priest, who can only declare someone to be clean (BW, 103).

Deserted Places

At the end of the story, Jesus is "outside in lonely places." Jesus and the leper have traded places (Edwards, 72).

Illustrations

Father Damien was a [Roman Catholic priest](#) from Belgium and member of the [Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary](#),ⁱⁱⁱ a [missionary religious institute](#). He won recognition for his ministry from 1873 to 1889 in the [Kingdom of Hawai'i](#) to people with [leprosy](#) (also known as Hansen's disease), who were required to live under a government-sanctioned medical quarantine on the island of [Moloka'i](#) on the Kalaupapa Peninsula.^{iv}

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Application

Jesus knew that the only lasting cure for physical ailments was not the temporary reprieve of a healing but resurrection—the putting of humankind into a condition where they are immune to disease, decay, and death and no longer subject to the ravages of sin (BW, 106).