

Complete Restoration for All Unclean, Part 1

Luke 5:14-16

There's such kindness and compassion and tenderness that this man, Jesus Christ, has toward the least of these. And I include myself as one of those. We're going to get, today, yet another striking picture of that compassion as we see, once again how his mercy is directed by divine purpose and by loving concern.

Jesus is going from city to city in Galilee. He is preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. Those disciples are with him, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee. And they're learning from him day after day, watching him work, listening to him preach and teach and explain. They're watching his compassion and mercy as he heals people, and he ministers to their needs. On one of those days in one of those cities, something surprising happened to Jesus and his disciples.

Look at verse 12 there in Luke 5. "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.’ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately the leprosy left him. 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.’ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.”

Now, if you know even a little about the Old Testament, you know that Leprosy is an unclean thing and lepers, themselves, are to be kept at a distance. And that’s because leprosy is a vivid picture of the defiling, all-encompassing nature of sin.

And listen, that is why this object lesson of leprosy is so useful because it teaches us to see sin as God sees sin. We do indeed look at the outward appearance. We’re only able to judge a book by its cover. And so to help us understand the comprehensively defiling nature of sin, God pointed us to look at this disease of leprosy. The portrayal of sin and its uncleanness, the outward portrayal of sin’s defilement, it’s so thorough and at times, it can be outright disgusting to look at. And our natural reaction is to withdraw, to pull away, to stay away, never to touch it.

Someone who like this man in our story, comes near to us and he's, as Luke described, full of leprosy, we are not about to rush up and give this guy a big, huge hug, to kiss him on his leprous cheeks. We don't want to get any on us. Perhaps there are some out there who, just out of compassion, a deep, deep compassion like a, you know, all those nurses and medical healthcare workers among us who have great compassion, they want to do that, but even they have to overcome a natural revulsion that they feel at the sight, and at times even the smell, of leprosy. We all feel like keeping a distance.

Listen, that is to show us, beloved, that none of us on our own is attractive to God because we are so thoroughly and comprehensively defiled by our sin. This leprosy is a vivid external portrayal of that internal corruption and defilement of the sin nature, of the guilt of sin. And get this, that is what makes the touch of Jesus so astounding, so remarkable. He reached out and touched this leper who was more defiled on the inside than he was on the outside. We might imagine the revulsion that Jesus had to overcome, and yet, there is no hint here at all, none whatsoever, that Jesus was repulsed. That is a picture of such great mercy toward us sinners, is it not?

Folks, that's the lesson we need to see in this story. That's the main point, that God sent Jesus to demonstrate his great mercy toward us sinners. We need to see ourselves as the leper, not as the crowd

watching the scene and saying, oh how interesting. Whoa, he touched the... No! We need to see ourselves as that guy. As sinners, we're not even benign in our sin and defilement.

It's not like it just, whoops, happened to us, we fell into it. We're active sinners. We pursue this. It makes us incredibly abhorrent to a holy God. If you could imagine it, it's like all of us are lepers and we are not just shamed by leprosy, in fact, we love our leprosy. We rejoice in our oozing sores, and in our rotting skin, and in the putrid stench of our leprous defilement. And not only that, but we want to spread the contagion. We want to infect everyone else around us with the same disease. We justify our defilement to each other, to God. We revel in it. We defend it as if it's understandable, excusable, okay. We even promote it. In our culture, I'll go a step further, we even celebrate it.

Beloved, that's how God sees us. On our own, that's how he sees us. And that's what makes his grace so amazing. That's what makes his mercy so astounding, so remarkable. As Paul wrote in Romans 5:8, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners," lepers, ugly, "Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were," not just sinners, not just ugly, not just repulsive, "if while we were enemies." We were leprous rebels

firing shots into the heavens at God. And if we were like that and, “We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” Beloved, this is our God loving us like this. And like this poor leper who came to Jesus, you and I, beloved, we can also find complete and total restoration for all our uncleanness. That’s what this text is about.

Point number one: Come to Jesus to be completely cleansed. Come to Jesus to be completely cleansed. And here’s where we need to get a picture of this defilement called leprosy. Look at Luke 5:12. Let’s get some perspective. “While he [Jesus] was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.”

We’ll stop there. Jesus is not in Capernaum anymore. As we said, he’s moved on. His first four disciples are with him, but what Luke wants us to see, what his medical background, remember he was a physician, his medical background points out is this man was full of leprosy. If anybody knew what that description was, Luke knew the fullness of this man’s leprosy. He is covered completely, totally full of leprosy.

And the question that comes up right off the bat as we face an interpretive issue us what is this guy doing in the city? Isn’t he

supposed to be outside the camp, outside the gates of the city, away from the population? In Leviticus 13:45 and 46, the law pushes lepers outside of the community. It says there, "The leperos person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose."

They were supposed to, in that day, make their appearance obviously contemptable. They were to dress in such a way and, and not even do make-up, no make-up, hair all unkempt. They were supposed to be in such a manner that people would know at first sight that they should steer clear. So, "The leperos person [...] shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip." So he's walking through society, he's covering his upper lip, that's probably to prevent the spread of an airborne contagion. And he was supposed to "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." Aah, that's rough.

Life as a leper was no picnic. It was lonely. It was isolated. These kinds of diseases classified as leprosy were pretty gross at times, also socially embarrassing, shameful. Worse still, it was your duty if you were afflicted with leprosy, it was your duty, you were

responsible for calling everybody's attention to yourself at the time you did not want anybody looking at you.

Most of the time these lepers lived in isolation. They lived in a leper colony, but when they came into town in the interest of the public good, you had to alert everyone to your presence. Torn clothing, unkempt appearance, crying out, unclean, unclean. So here's Jesus and his disciples, and they're walking through town and they're surrounded once again by this throng of people and suddenly they happen upon this leper. And the Greek text says it this way, "Behold, a man full of leprosy." Not even a verb there. It's just, just hitting us with the suddenness of it. One minute they're walking through town preaching and teaching, the next minute, Poof! There he is right in front of me. Sudden, unexpected.

Now is this man violating the law of Moses by surprising the group in that way? If he had been crying out according to the Mosaic prescription we just read, he should have been crying out, "Unclean, unclean," to warn everybody of his presence as he approached. If we can understand that Luke's description of his condition as full of leprosy is meant to tell us something. We might find a way to let him off the hook a bit as far as the law is concerned. So if you're there in your Bibles in Leviticus 13, look at verses 9-11. When a man is afflicted with a leprous disease, he shall be brought to the priest,

and the priest shall look. And if there is a white swelling in the skin that has turned the hair white, and there is raw flesh in the swelling, it is a chronic leprous disease in the skin of his body, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean. He shall not shut him up, for he is unclean. That is, he is not going to put him into quarantine to see how this goes. He's going to say immediately, unclean. This case is a more severe case. It's a situation that doesn't require an isolation period. If he sees white swelling in the skin, if he sees raw flesh, he makes an immediate diagnosis, leprous disease, pronounces the person unclean. This is the case of an active infection and as long as the man is partially covered by his active skin disorder, the swelling, the raw flesh, this man remains unclean because the disease is still active.

But notice what happens when the man is covered by the skin disorder. Look at verse 12. "And if the leprous disease breaks out in the skin, so that the leprous disease covers all the skin of the diseased person from head to foot, so far as the priest can see, then the priest shall look, and if the leprous disease has covered all his body, he shall pronounce him clean of the disease; it has turned all white, and he is clean." That meant the infection had run its course. The contagious period is over, and the priest can pronounce him here clean and the man could return to the community. He may not look too good. He may not be too presentable. People may still want to stay



away from him, but ceremonially, ritually, he's clean. He's not going to spread infection.

So in Luke 5:12, Luke has described that leper as full of leprosy and in my judgment, though the guy was clearly identifiable as a leper, he was so overcome by the infection that he had been pronounced clean by the priest. That's what allowed him to come upon Jesus, his disciples, the crowd in such a sudden way without announcing his arrival. Again, the man may have been hideous to look at, disturbing in his appearance, perhaps even somewhat disfigured, but he wasn't remanded to the perimeter of society, in the city, needing to live outside the camp.

The Hebrew word is, *saraat*. It's translated in the Greek as, *lepros*, which is where we get our English word, leprosy. Those words cover a whole host of skin disorders as we can see here. According to one commentator, the scribes counted as a many as 72 afflictions that were defined as leprosy that fell underneath this category. Everything thing from eczema to psoriasis, favus to leukoderma, boils, burns.

But imagine if you were living at that time. Many of us, today, have had skin conditions that could fall underneath these strictures in Leviticus 13. If you saw that on your body back then, what would

you do? Would you cover it up? Would you hide it not wanting anybody to see? Not likely because you'd be considered a public health risk. And if it so overcame you and you happen to infect others, there could be worse consequences for you knowing you had a deadly contagious infection in your body and you didn't let anybody know. You'd be concerned about the public health. You'd be concerned about the outbreak of infection in the community. You would not want to be responsible for that. So you'd go to the priest. You'd accept his decision because, after all, he's only doing what God commanded.

People understood that God is the one who gave leprosy. And whether it was true or not, they tended to believe leprosy was an instance of divine punishment. Perhaps the leper himself or herself didn't commit a particular sin you could tie directly to this judgment of leprosy, but people wondered who sinned that this person has leprosy. Was it this person, his parents? Why is God angry and punishing?

You may remember in Numbers chapter 12 that God gave leprosy to Moses' sister Miriam. She had sinfully reproached Moses for marrying a Cushite woman, an Ethiopian and added to that was her arrogant presumption when she said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken," through, "only through Moses? Hasn't he spoken through us, as well?"

Immediately, Numbers 12:2, the Lord heard it and she was judged by being covered with leprosy, becoming as white as snow.

God punished King Uzziah as well when he overstepped his responsibility as king and he tried to offer incense like a priest. Uzziah, you're not a priest. Be content with being a king. But he entered in, tried to offer incense, God struck him with leprosy, as well, suddenly, so suddenly that the priest rushed him in out of the temple. It says in 2 Chronicles 26:21, "King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper, he lived in a separate house, for he was exclude from the house of the Lord."

The people recognized leprosy is something God gave, and they generally viewed it as a punishment from God for some kind of sin. And since God gave the leprosy, well, only God could take it away. Only God could lift the punishment that he had inflicted. So the priests are not healers, they're public health inspectors. They're responsible to inspect, to examine, to identify.

This important aspect of their role as priests, it not only protected the community from contagion, but it also instilled in God's people a vivid object lesson about the defiling nature of sin. We talked about that in the beginning. As a graphic portrayal of

uncleanness, this prescribed response to instances of leprosy in the community, they were meant to instruct the people by obeying God's word in this matter of leprosy here. People learned that God desires total purity. God desires absolute holiness. He desires cleanliness among his people. Sin is defiling. And when it's pictured by a skin disorder, it's viewed in its proper light as disgusting, as shameful, it calls for separation and isolation. God wants his people completely clean.

Now turn back, if you will, to Luke chapter 5, and verse 12. And I'm inclined to give this guy the benefit of the doubt. I think he had been pronounced ceremonially clean by the priests and he was not here in violation of the law. But he was still covered by this ugly skin disorder and this poor man longed for complete and total cleansing. Look what it says there, "When he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and," he, "begged him, 'Lord if you will, you can make me clean.'" If you will, you are able to make me clean.

He appropriately falls on his face in a posture of worship. He even prays to him. The text says, "begging him." That's the word that is used there. And the leper has not only rightly identified Jesus as Lord, he has also rightly judged the fact Jesus possesses the power to make him clean. As we said, God is the one who gave the leprosy, which means God only could take it away. And this man, he may not have known

the fullness of Jesus' identity, he may not have been aware of the incarnational reality of divinity in front of him robed in humanity, but he knows enough. He had heard enough to know Jesus possessed the very power of God. His only question is, "Are you willing?"

That's the right question. He bowed before him, he called him, Lord, he acknowledged his power and authority, and he identified the essential issue: Is it your will to cleanse me? Because I'd really like to be cleansed, but is it your will? He longed for cleansing, but he seems here ready to accept whatever the Lord decided.

I wonder if you and I in our prayers have the same attitudes. Are we willing to accept whatever the Lord's will is? We should be, because we as Christians know that even in pain, and affliction, and suffering the Lord's will is always best. I'd rather be in pain, and affliction, and suffering, and in the center of the Lord's will, than whole-bodied outside of it.

The leper here also got to the heart of the matter because he wasn't just asking for healing, he was asking for cleansing. That's important. To be cleansed of leprosy was thorough and complete. It not only meant the removal of a superficial skin disorder, but it meant the shame associated with that as well was gone, along with the social

stigma, gone as well. But even deeper than that, it meant the removal of some kind of divine disfavor. It's an expression of divine grace that he looked for. This man came seeking cleansing of disorders both superficial on the skin and deep in the heart. Cleansing the physical condition, it required the removal of divine punishment of God's disfavor. To be cleansed and restored to divine grace, that's what he was after here.

That was verse 13, and, "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him." Stop there. Before saying, "I will; be cleansed," Jesus showed in him his willingness. He demonstrated it. What an incredible expression of compassion. No one in that society would have touched that leper, especially a rabbi out of fear he might contract uncleanness. But Jesus here is driven by compassion. And Jesus felt a deep sympathy for this man, moved so much to extend his hand in compassion. We need to know that about our Lord, don't we? In that touch, as James Edwards put it, "Jesus removed the social, physical, and spiritual chasms prescribed by the Torah and custom alike."

"Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be cleansed.' And immediately the leprosy left him." Why wasn't Jesus made unclean here by making physical contact with the leper? As we said, the man had likely already been pronounced clean by a priest on the authority of the law of Moses. Jesus saw deeper than we see. What

was more unclean to him was not the leprosy that he could see, but the heart that he could see.

I like the way James Edwards put it again. He said, "A reverse contagion has taken place. Rather than Jesus being polluted by the leper, the leper is cleansed by Jesus' holiness." That right there, folks, is the cleansing power of holiness. It drives the contagion away. It drives the disease away; it drives the sin away. And at that moment, that man's questions are answered. Jesus not only possessed the power to cleanse him, he had the compassion to provide the healing, cleansing touch, as well. The leper came to Jesus to be completely cleansed. His request is granted by a loving, merciful Savior. What is this but encouragement for us all, to come to Jesus to be completely cleansed. As we said earlier, leprosy is a picture of sin's defilement, and of God's condemnation and judgment.

J.C. Ryle said this, "What are we all but lepers spiritually in God's sight. Sin is the deadly sickness by which we are all affected. It has eaten into our constitution. It has affected all of our faculties: Heart, conscience, mind, and will, are all diseased by sin. From the sole of our foot to the crown of our head, there is no soundness about us, but only wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores, such as the state in which we're all born, such is the state in which we naturally live. We are in once sense dead long before we are

laid in the grave. Our bodies may be healthy and active, but our souls are by nature dead in trespasses and sins. But there is no spiritual leprosy too hard for Christ.” He is willing. He is able to cleanse all who come.