

February 15, 2015

*Mark 1:40-45: **"If You Will, You Can Make Me Clean"***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today's Gospel lesson tells us about a leper. Perhaps no disease mentioned in the Bible is a better metaphor for sin than leprosy. *Easton's Bible Dictionary* describes the disease this way: "[It] begins with specks on the eyelids and on the palms, gradually spreading over the body, bleaching the hair white wherever they appear, crusting the affected parts with white scales, and causing terrible sores and swellings. From the skin the disease eats inward to the bones, rotting the whole body piecemeal."

The life of a leper must have been truly horrific. A diagnosis in Jesus' day was essentially a death sentence. One can only imagine what it must have been like to say "good bye" to loved ones and spend the rest of your days outside of the community. It says in 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."

Another symptom of leprosy, that I recently came to learn about, is that there is little or no pain associated with the disease. Now I want you think about that for a minute. All that rotting of the flesh and horrible sores and swelling caused little or no pain. As a Lutheran Pastor [James T. Batchelor, Missouri Synod] states it:

The reason for this is that the leprosy attacks the nervous system. The result is that while there are massive reasons for pain, there are no nerves to carry the pain signals to the brain. That means that there can be secondary infections that also attack the body of the leper and he has no idea. He has no idea because the nerves for pain are gone . . . Think what that would be like for a person with leprosy. When they woke up in the morning, they would have to look around to see what body parts had fallen off during the night. Since their nerves were shot, they could not tell by feel. They had to examine themselves to see what had happened to their body during the night.

Put *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, Leviticus 13, and the words of the pastor together and you end up with quite a picture of leprosy as sin. As is often the case in Scripture, earthly realities are attached to spiritual truths in order to drive home an understanding. That certainly is the case here. To begin with, as leprosy eats a person away, so does sin remove us from God, from one another, and everything God intended for us. The heart of sin is to be alone. The fact that there is little or no pain also indicates something very true about sin. Think about it for a moment. Many people don't even recognize that they are spiritually dead. Many people think that bad things in the world are even natural. As physical pain is important to indicate that there is a problem physically, so is spiritual pain necessary for us to realize that we need help and that our help can only come in the name of the Lord!

We can be very grateful that God uses his law in order to point out our selfish rebellion, thereby making us sensitive to the spiritual reality of pain and punishment. He tears our clothes so to speak, keeps the hair of our head loose so that it is in our face, causes us to shout that we are unclean, puts us in a

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dwelling outside the camp so that we might desire to be in the camp. In this kind of an understanding of things, we cry out with the leper of our Gospel lesson: "And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.'" Indeed, we all wish for healing.

No doubt the man had heard about how Jesus had healed the sick. As leprosy was an outward sign of sin, so also the healing word of Jesus that did physically heal him was a sign that pointed to the removal of his sin. The wages of sin is death. Sin is the destruction of everything physical and spiritual, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ and a brand new body that will no longer be mortal, but immortal - no longer subject to sin, death, and the power of the devil. The removal of leprosy - the outward sign of sin was pointing to the removal of sin itself and the restoration of his body was an outward sign pointing to the resurrection. And we read the words of our Gospel lesson: "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean (Mark 1:41-42)."

When Jesus said, "I will; be clean," he could very well have said, "your sins are forgiven." For example, in Mark 2:1-12, when Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic man, it says:

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" - he said to the paralytic - "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

Now, I want you to notice in our Gospel lesson that Jesus says to the leper after he has been healed, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them (Mark 1:44)." The healing of a leper had a religious significance. Jesus sends him to the priest. To have leprosy was an outward sign of sin, and to be healed of leprosy would be an outward sign of the forgiveness of sin. The priest was to verify this very thing - a powerful testimony to the people. If the priest declared him to be "clean," he would be restored to the community of God. All of the aloneness of sin is taken away!

In life, the leper had nothing to look forward to but a miserable life and a hopeless end. But we see a willing Jesus that makes him clean. At Jesus' word, the man went from a body of decaying flesh to restoration. Modern medicine can cure many forms of leprosy, but they all work gradually over time and cannot restore lost toes and fingers. The word immediately tells us that Jesus' healing was instantaneous. The word *clean* tells us that the man's health was better than if the leprosy had never happened - the healing was perfect and comforts us in every infirmity we may face.

As Jesus cleansed this leper, so does he clean us by faith in him. And our faith looks forward to the day when all that has been lost will be completely restored, immediately! What a great and wonderful gift it is that Christ has declared us clean by his cross. I love what it says in those familiar words of Isaiah 53: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom

men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not [as if Jesus himself is the leper]. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." In the cross of Jesus we are cleansed.

The historian Josephus says that lepers were to be treated as dead men. Many of the rabbis said that next to touching a dead body, getting near a leper was the rankest form of defilement. In Palestine at the time of Jesus, lepers were barred from the city of Jerusalem and any other walled city. One rabbi wrote that he would throw stones at lepers to keep them away.

We can be so very thankful that our Lord and Savior came to make us clean. He could have left us all for dead. He could have chosen to never touch us with his word of forgiveness and he could have barred us from the city of heaven forever. And he could have justly thrown stones at us to keep us away. Instead, look at the teacher we have! He shed his blood to cleanse us from all sin. He carried our sin to take it away. "If you will, you can make me clean!" we lepers cry out. And Jesus says, "I am willing; be clean!"

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott