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Sermon Notes

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Jesus Compassionately Cures a Leper

Mark 1:40-45

Essential to our salvation is to face the reality of our true condition.

All of Jesus' healings were not merely awesome displays of his supernatural power but also metaphors, spiritual depictions of our true spiritual condition in the eyes of our Holy God.

Jesus' healings operated in the realm of human weakness, human defects, human frailty, human repulsiveness, human inability. Jesus himself linked physical healing to our spiritual condition with this statement:

Luke 5:31-32 "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

To be righteous in the sight of God was the same as being spiritually healthy... just as physically healthy people don't need a doctor, so also spiritually righteous people don't need a savior. But Jesus knows our true condition better than we do... and all his healings in some way portrayed our true spiritual condition. One of the clearest of these was his healing of a leper in today's text.

Lepers were utterly repulsive in every regard... they looked disgusting, with their flesh half eaten away; they smelled disgusting because of the rot of their flesh; they were utterly desperate, since there was no cure; they were universally dreaded because of their contagious disease... everyone fled from them, sometimes screaming in terror. They were also economically destitute because they could not earn money —

anything they touched would have been considered defiled; they were spiritually outcasts... no better than the lowest uncircumcised Gentile, unable to go to the temple and worship God with their fellow Israelites...

In all these ways, they were a grim picture of our SPIRITUAL condition before God. Think of this general description of an unredeemed sinner in the sight of God:

Romans 3:10-18 "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

What do you think a person in such a spiritual condition looks like to a holy God?

Habakkuk 1:13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.

So, when Jesus cures a leper at the end of Mark 1, it is beneficial for us all to insert ourselves into the story as spiritually defiled, corrupted, repulsive in the eyes of God. And when Jesus is moved by compassion and tenderly touches a man who has been untouchable perhaps for years is a powerful picture of our own salvation.

Even more amazing is what this brief account teaches us about Jesus. As with all his healings, this one shows us the infinite majesty of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The healing is effortless, perfect, and instantly effective. His desire to touch this defiled outcast shows again his yearning for a close relationship with sinners. At the end of this sermon, though, we will see how this account is written to give us a sense of an amazing reversal... Jesus took the outcast's place as an outcast himself. Therefore this is a

beautiful picture of the gospel itself... of Christ's compassionate work for sinners like you and me.

But it is only available for people who understand how ugly was are spiritually in the sight of God. How WE are really the lepers.

I. The Leper's Plea

Mark 1:40 A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

A. The Terrors of Leprosy

1. I have already described how awful this disease was seen to be in Jesus' day
2. The English word "leprosy" comes from the Greek word "lepros" meaning scale... like the scales that fell from Saul's eyes after his conversion; it gives us a sense of the scaly nature of a leper's skin because of the ravages of the disease
3. There were actually many skin diseases that fell under this category, not all of them equally serious... the book of Leviticus describes a wide range of skin conditions that were addressed in the Law of Moses; some just had to do with eczema or other forms of dry scaly skin that were no real threat, or running sores or scabs; others were far more serious
4. Biblical scholars believe that the most serious form of leprosy, the one that brought terror to the population and devastated the lives of all who had it was Hansen's Disease; a communicable bacterial infection that could spread through the air or by physical touch
5. Even today, there is no cure for Hansen's Disease, though its symptoms can be greatly mitigated
6. Leprosy of that sort usually begins with pain and is followed by numbness as the disease attacks the nervous system

7. The leper's skin loses its color and hair begins to fall out; the skin swells and bunches together; the leper often causes the body to emit a foul odor, making the leper even more repulsive
8. Perhaps most devastating of all is the numbness that results in a loss of the sensation of pain; thus the lepers frequently destroy their own bodies by injuring themselves without knowing it
9. Philip Yancey wrote a book about pain entitled *Where Are You God When It Hurts?* speaking about how essential pain is to protect us from greater damage... he described how awful it is for people suffering from Hansen's Disease to feel no pain at all:

"For thousands of years people thought Hansen's Disease caused the ulcers on hands and feet and face which eventually led to rotting flesh and loss of limbs. Modern research has shown that in 99 percent of the cases, Hansen's Disease only numbs the extremities. The destruction follows solely because the warning system of pain is gone. How does the decay happen? In villages of Africa and Asia, a person with Hansen's Disease has been known to reach directly into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato. Nothing in his body told him not to. Patient's at [a leper's] hospital in India would work all day gripping a shovel with a protruding nail, or extinguish a burning wick with their bare hands or walk on splintered glass....The daily routines of life ground away at the patient's hands and feet but no warning system alerted him. If an ankle turned, tearing tendon and muscle, he would adjust and walk crooked."

B. The Religious Defilement of Leprosy

1. In order to protect his chosen people from infectious diseases, the Lord made certain laws causing sick people to be quarantined from the rest of the community

Leviticus 13:45-46 "The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' 46 As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp.

2. Imagine what this was like socially! People need to be together...
 “It is not good for a man to be alone!” They need to be touched, hugged, patted on the back; they need to shake people’s hands, greet family members with a kiss... sit across from friends at a dinner table and see their faces, listen to their voices... be together!
 All of that is over for the leper
3. Even worse, they were effectively cut off from corporate worship... as if cast out in the sight of God
4. Since the temple was the center of Jewish religious life, this spiritual exile was a devastating condition for lepers
5. It was like a living hell for them...

Psalm 31:22 In my alarm I said, "I am cut off from your sight!"

Psalm 88:5-6 I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. ⁶ You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

This is the condition of the poor man who came to Jesus that day!

C. The Leper’s Plea to the Lord

1. The leper cast off all concern as he approached the Lord
2. He would not stand far off... he had heard of Jesus’ healing ministry and wanted to be included
3. He broke all societal and religious norms and came close to Jesus
4. He fell on his knees before him and begged him... he called him “Lord”; in Luke’s Gospel, he even went lower, falling on his face before Jesus
5. He was moved by faith; the accounts of Jesus’ healings had convinced him that Jesus could do ANYTHING
6. So he begged Jesus:

“If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

7. This humble plea shows great faith; there is no doubt whatsoever that Jesus CAN do this... the only question is WILL he?
8. This is a pattern of all prayer, all requests we make of the Lord
9. Convinced of God's omnipotence, we know that God can do anything:

Job 42:2 "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted."

10. But if God has made no specific promise to us, we cannot presume on him...

John Calvin: "Men ought not to expect more than God promises. The leper had not learned by any inspired communication, or any promise of God, what Christ would do. It would have been improper in him, therefore, to go beyond these limits."

We cannot make demands! God does not OWE us a healing

11. The leper knew, it was well within the Lord's power; it's just a matter of Christ's WILLINGNESS

D. The Leper's Desire: to be CLEAN

1. The beautiful Greek word for healing... to be CLEAN; free from the disease

E. What Must the Crowd Have Been Thinking?

John MacArthur: "One can only imagine the people's reaction as they watched the dramatic scene unfold. Horror mixed with indignation must have swept through the crowd of onlookers. Some probably shrank back in startled fear, covering their mouths as they quickly retreated. Perhaps others glanced around for stones or sticks to drive away the unwanted outcast. Others surely stood watching in stunned silence, wondering how Jesus himself would respond."

II. The Lord's Compassionate Power

Mark 1:41-42 Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

A. The Compassion of Jesus

1. The text says that Jesus was "filled with compassion" or "moved by compassion"; the Greek word root the compassion within the bowels... feeling it deeply within him
2. Jesus displayed a very healthy and powerful emotional life
3. Unlike gods of the Greek stoics who were thinking machines untouched whatsoever by the deplorable human condition, Jesus perfectly displayed the emotions of our heavenly Father, a God who is gracious and compassionate... he pities and seeks to relieve the miseries of his creatures
4. By far the most common emotion ascribed to Jesus was his COMPASSION; we will see it as the reason for his teaching ministry in chapter 6, because they were like a sheep without shepherd; he will openly declare his compassion for the crowd in Mark 8

Mark 8:2-3 "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. ³ If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

5. Jesus is moved deeply from within concerning the miseries of others... he can immerse himself in their condition, feel deeply what it must have been like to be in such a situation
6. So it is with this leper; Jesus was moved with compassion for his plight
7. That is why I said that this is the worst thing Job said about God:

Job 9:23 When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent.

As though God gets some kind of pleasure over the sufferings of innocent people

Christ perfectly lived out a life of compassion for the suffering

He would weep before raising Lazarus from the dead because of the abject sorrow of Martha and Mary over the death of their brother; he would also weep over Jerusalem because their unbelief would lead to their own destruction

We will see this compassion again and again in Jesus

But it is not a feeling only... Jesus has the POWER to do something about it!

B. Jesus' Compassionate Touch and Awesome Healing Power

CSB Mark 1:41 Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched him. "I am willing," He told him. "Be made clean."

1. Jesus does not merely feel feelings about this man
2. He physically extends his own hand to touch this man
3. What must that have been like? Who knows how long it has been since someone touched this poor leper? He was used to people running screaming from him... even his own family
4. This was in some ways exactly where the Law of Moses took this man; in order to protect the community from the communicable disease, this man had to be made an outcast
5. Anyone who touched him would become unclean himself, and liable to contract the same disease himself; holiness doesn't move to defilement and make it holy; but defilement DOES move to cleanness and make it unclean... that is the normal pattern

Leviticus 5:3 If anyone touches anything that would make him unclean, whether he is aware of it or not, when he learns of it he is guilty.

Haggai 2:11-14 "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: ¹² If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some

wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?" The priests answered, "No." ¹³ Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?" "Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled." ¹⁴ Then Haggai said, "'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the LORD. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.

6. But not Jesus!!! Jesus is the exception!!! His touch produces healing in the defiled man
7. We have noted before that Jesus deeply desired a personal relationship with each of the people he healed
8. That is why so often he used physical touch to heal people
9. He just did the same in the last account... the healing of Peter's mother-in-law by touching her hand
10. Keep in mind, the Roman Centurion in Matthew 8 made it plain that none of this was necessary:

Matthew 8:8-9 "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

Jesus healed the centurion's servant FROM AFAR! So also the royal official's son in John 4 from many miles away; the Syro-Phoenician woman's demon-possessed daughter was left at home lying on a bed, and Jesus drove out the demon from a distance, not even seeing the girl

So in the case of a leper, it might have seemed best to heal from a distance

But why? Jesus would not be defiled by touching this man, but rather perfect health would flow from his hand to the leper's whole body

Picture two rooms side by side, separated by a door... one of them brilliantly lit, the other in perfect darkness; when you throw open the door between them, the light instantly defeats the darkness... the light floods in and drives out the darkness

So it is with Jesus' touch of the leper... health flowed from Jesus' hand to this man's diseased body

But more than that... he wanted this sad, lonely, isolated, outcast man to feel human touch for the first time in perhaps years

11. The power to heal with a WORD

“Be clean!”

- a. This is the word of the power of God
- b. By God's word, the universe existed

Psalm 33:6 By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.

- c. Jesus is the Word of God... all he need do is say the word and the healing happens

ESV Mark 1:42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

IMMEDIATELY! There is no convalescence, no delay, no time to regain strength

All the damage that leprosy had done to this man's body was instantly healed

He was CLEAN... the flesh was restored like it was NEW

When Naaman the Syrian general was cured of his leper, this was the description:

2 Kings 5:14 his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

12. Completely physically fit

- a. Jesus would command him to go from there to Jerusalem to show himself to the priests
- b. That journey was about a 100-mile hike!
- c. This leper needed no time to rest... he was immediately fit

C. All Jesus' Healings are a Picture of our Perfect Healing at the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:42-44 The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

At the resurrection, Jesus will INSTANTLY give all the redeemed imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual bodies

III. The Leper's Disobedience

A. Jesus Commanded the Former Leper Very Sternly

Mark 1:43-44 Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴ "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

1. The Greek for "strong warning" implies a strictness, like a sharp command from a superior officer or a king
2. He does not say it gently but extremely clearly; he is the King of kings and Lord of lords... and true conversion always results in obedience
3. Again, notice the word "at once" or "immediately"... he wanted immediate obedience from this man
4. It began with the command not to tell anyone... more on that in a moment

B. Obeying the Law of Moses

1. Jesus came not to abolish the law of Moses but to fulfill it

2. Jesus was the most law-abiding Jew in history; he was born under the Law of Moses and lived his whole life in perfect obedience to its precepts
3. The Law in Leviticus 14 required the priests to evaluate the man and prove his right to re-enter society
4. The priests would take two birds and kill one of them in an earthenware vessel with running water; the live bird, along with cedar wood, a scarlet cord and hyssop were dipped in the blood of the slain bird, and the leper was sprinkled seven times with the blood; then the priests were to examine his skin and pronounce him clean, and the live bird was to be set free in an open field; then the former leper was to wash all his clothes, shave off all his hair, and go into a seven-day quarantine; on the eighth day, the priests would offer a final round of sacrifices for him and he would be clean, able to rejoin Jewish society and worship at the temple
5. Jesus wanted all this done AS A WITNESS or TESTIMONY to the priests!! Some of those priests would see the amazing evidence of Jesus' power and believe in him

C. To Command to Tell No One

1. Why did Jesus so frequently command people to tell no one
2. We will see this again and again in Mark's Gospel... some call it the "Messianic Secret"
3. But keep in mind, by the Holy Spirit inspiring Mark to write this account in his Gospel, God wanted this story proclaimed to the ends of the earth and to the end of time
4. But right at that moment, there was a practical issue... and it comes immediately as a result of this man's disobedience

Mark 1:45 Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

This is all about CROWD CONTROL...

The people were hugely motivated to follow Jesus everywhere and receive healings...

But Jesus did not come into the world as a physical healer; “death is the final enemy” ... disease and death would continue until the end of the world

The most important aspect of Jesus’ public ministry was his preaching; but the people were all about temporal alleviation of their immediate griefs... they greatly underestimated their need for forgiveness of sins through faith in the Word of God

But because of this man’s disobedience, huge crowd flocked to Jesus incessantly for healing

Immediately in the next chapter, we will see a crowd so huge crushing in on him that some men have to dig through a roof to get a paralyzed man to Jesus

Furthermore, these crowds lacked faith

John 2:23-25 *Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. ²⁵ He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.*

AND the frenzy got so high, they wanted to take Jesus forcibly to do what they wanted

John 6:15 *Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*

D. Demons Were More Obedient to Jesus Than Humans

1. Every demon did instantly what Jesus commanded them to do
2. But human beings often disobeyed... like this man

E. A Rebuke to Our Failure to Evangelize

This man disobeyed and spread the news everywhere when Jesus commanded him not to

But now, Jesus is commanding us to spread this gospel everywhere and we often disobey and remain silent!!

IV. The Lord Becomes an Outcast

A. One Final and Fascinating Point

B. Jesus Unable to Enter Any Towns Publicly

Mark 1:45 *Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places.*

1. Jesus intended to go throughout Galilee preaching in all the towns and villages

Mark 1:38 *Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else-- to the nearby villages-- so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."*

Mark 6:6 *Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.*

2. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus tells us that there were 240 towns and villages in Galilee
3. Because of this man's spreading the story, Jesus could not do his mission the way he wanted to
4. Yet people still came to him from everywhere... they found where he was; huge crowds
5. But to some degree, Jesus was a practical outcast

One commentator:

"Mark began this story with Jesus on the inside and the leper on the outside. At the end of the story, Jesus is 'outside in lonely places.' Jesus and the leper have traded places. Early in his ministry, Jesus is already an outsider in human society. Mark casts him in the role of the Servant of the Lord who bears the iniquities of others and whose bearing of them causes him to be

numbered with the transgressors." [James R. Edwards, *Mark, Pillar Commentary*]

This story becomes a beautiful picture of what Jesus did for us on the cross... becoming alienated from God and man by bearing our sin... as Jesus was dying on the cross he did so "outside the gate" and outside of fellowship with God

Hebrews 13:12-13 Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

Mark 15:34 at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

As sinners, we were at one time spiritual lepers who lived in alienation and isolation from God, and in estrangement from each other. Christ, by bearing our sins as our substitute took that isolation upon himself and threw open the gates of heaven... cleansing us from our defilement by his blood.