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“Touching Untouchables, Trading Places” Mark 1:40-45

Introduction

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). That's the key verse of Mark's gospel—a gospel that emphasizes the service of Jesus Christ and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, two truths we see in this story about Jesus in his second year of ministry—sometime during his ministry tour in northern Israel outside Capernaum.

If you like a good short story, you find one in Mark 1:40-45. If you like a simple story with just two characters in it, you will enjoy Mark 1:40-45. If you like profound symbolism in a short, simple story, you will find it here. It goes like this:

“And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” 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. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, “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.” But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter. ”

Only two characters here: an untouchable leper, conscious of his fate, earnestly desiring to be cleansed, and humble enough to come to Christ for cleansing and a compassionate Christ who doesn't shrink from laying His hand even on the loathsome leper who plows through the crowd, throws himself at Jesus' feet, a mass of rotting flesh, covered with leprosy.

We will look at this story by taking five quick snapshots. In this story about leprosy, there is a story about salvation from sin. Leprosy is consistently portrayed in the Bible as figure of sin. Sin and leprosy share an insidious beginnings, slow progress, destructive power, ultimate ruin. Leprosy is a powerful sign of moral depravity—a picture of sinners walking around dead in their trespasses against God' law. Keep this in mind as we go through this text.

Also note that as we watch Jesus touching this untouchable leper in the end they end up trading places—an interesting development in this story.

The Sinner's Plight

First, we see the sinner's plight as we see a leper who comes to Jesus! I thought I knew a lot about leprosy before I started studying this text this week but learned so much I didn't know. Here's quick overview of this horrific disease which had more than medical implications in the first century in Israel.

- Its **origins**: Many medical historians say this disease originated in Egypt and the basis for that is that the bacteria for leprosy, believe it or not was discovered in a mummy. That's right the bacteria was mummified with the mummy. Some even believe that this was the first bacterium identified for causing human disease.
- Its **pathology**: Dr. L. S. Huizenga has written, "Leprosy generally begins with pain in certain areas of the body, numbness follows. Soon the skin in such spots loses its original color, gets to be thick, glossy and scaly. The thicken spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears, begins to bunch with deep furrows between the swelling so that the face of the afflicted individual begins to resemble that of a lion. The disease-producing agent frequently also attacks the larynx. The leper's voice acquires a grating quality, his throat becomes hoarse. He can now not only see, feel and smell the leper, you can hear his rasping voice.

"Leprosy often begins with a whiter pink patch of skin, usually on the brow, on the nose, on the ear, the cheek, the chin. The patch begins to spread in all directions. And one of the early signs is the eyebrows and eyelashes disappear, then spongy tumorous swelling grows on the face and then on the body. The disease becomes systemic, it involves the internal organs as well as the skin, fingers and toes can be reabsorbed into the body because the bacillus-invading the bone marrow impairs the blood supply, causes the bones to shrivel, it causes the extremities to shrivel. And because of the loss of feeling, because of the terrible nerve damage, the victim then destroys his own tissue because he has no feeling and there are stories about people who literally wore off their fingers doing simple things like washing dishes or tying their shoes, or using a rake because they cannot feel anything. The bacillus can destroy the eye, cause blindness, can penetrate the teeth so the teeth fall out, it penetrates the internal organs, causes sterility." (MacArthur).

Kent Hughes in his commentary references Dr. Paul Brand, a Christian physician, who has dealt extensively with this disease: What is important to note is that leprosy, or Hansen's disease as it is better known today (after the man who diagnosed its cause), is not a rotting infection as is commonly thought, nor are its horrible outward physical deformities imposed by the disease. In recent years, the research of Dr. Paul Brand and others has proven that the disfigurement associated with Hansen's disease comes solely because the body's warning

system of pain is destroyed. The disease acts as an anesthetic, bringing numbness to the extremities as well as to the ears, eyes, and nose. The devastation that follows comes from such incidents as reaching one's hand 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 traumatized and eventually stump-like. In Third-World countries, vermin sometimes chew on sleeping lepers. Thus, Dr. Brand, after performing corrective surgery on a leper, would send a cat home with him as normal post-operative procedure. Dr. Brand calls the disease a "painless hell," and indeed it is."

- Its **cure**: In the Bible, there is never any reference (aside from a miracle) to someone being healed of leprosy, only being cleansed from it. In 1982, there was some breakthrough in treating leprosy. Drugs have been developed over the last 25 years that bring relief but no treatment has been designed to restore what has been lost.
- Its **social dimensions**: a leper was an untouchable. He was an outcast in society. A leper was robbed of more than his health. He lost his name, occupation, family, fellowship with others, and even access to public worship.
 - Lepers were truly the living dead in Jesus' day.
 - They were required to stand 150 feet away from people who were upwind and 6 feet away from those downwind.
 - A leper who entered a house made it unclean
 - A leper in Israel were to make themselves look repugnant. *““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. ”* (Leviticus 13:45–46)
- Its **extensiveness**
 - Although rarely mentioned in the Bible or in the NT, it would appear this disease was quite widespread in Jesus' lifetime.
 - More than a million cases of leprosy reported worldwide back in 2000, but some estimated the number to be twice as much due to under-reported cases
- The biblical data
 - Extensive mention of leprosy in Leviticus 13-14---assessing it and cleansing from it
 - Only two recorded OT instances of healing a leper: Miriam (Numbers 12:10ff) and Naaman (2 Kings 5)
 - Only two instances of Jesus healing lepers: here and the ten lepers (Luke 17) Although, it is quite possible he healed Simon the leper whose home he visited in Mark 14:3. The assumption is is that Simon was not

- a leper when he invites all these people to his house. Why invite Jesus?
Possibly Jesus had healed him.
- A sign of sin and judgment—had to live outside the camp, David's curse on Joab's house (1 Samuel 3:29) and the Uzziah's curse (2 Chron. 26)

So here comes this leper to Jesus. This would be an offensive and provocative sight. But here he comes imploring Jesus and kneeling prostrate face down before Jesus. He is respectful, humble, reverent, conscious of his own plight. And he says, "If you will, you can make me clean!"

He didn't doubt his ability, just Christ's willingness. He didn't doubt his power, just His mercy! It was not a question of could Jesus heal him in his mind, but would Jesus heal him.

Friends, this man saw his plight in regard to leprosy. So we should ask ourselves today, "Do we see our plight today as sinners?" There are two lies sin loves to feed to us. First, it consoles, "You really aren't that bad!" The second says, "You are so bad. God would never have you! Don't even approach Him for cleansing."

I wonder do you see your sin this morning? To see your sin and the death-sentence our sin carries is the first step toward true salvation. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit [they see themselves as spiritually bankrupt because of their sin] for there is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:3-4). Do you see yourself as "unclean" before God this day because of your sin?

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached in regards to seeing our sin,

"What is more, unless you have experienced that, unless you have known that, you are not a Christian, you do not believe in Christ as your personal Savior Until you realize that you cannot possibly have felt the need of Christ; you may have felt the need of help and advice and comfort, but until you awake to the fact that your nature itself is evil, until you realize that your trouble is that you yourself are wrong, and that your whole nature is wrong, until you realize that, you will never have felt the need of a Savior. Christ cannot help or advise or comfort you until He has first of all saved you, until He has changed your nature. Oh, my friends, have you yet felt this? God have mercy upon you if you haven't. You may have been inside the church all your life and actively engaged in its work, but still I say (and I am merely repeating what is said repeatedly in the Bible) that unless you have at some time or other felt that your very nature itself is sinful, that you are, in the words of St. Paul, 'dead in sin' then you have never known Jesus Christ as a Savior, and if you do not know Him as a Savior you do not know Him at all.

My fellow Christian brothers and sisters, is there unconfessed sin in your life this day? Unconfessed because you have grown so accustomed to it? Unconfessed because you have rationalized it away? But it is eating away at your spiritual strength. It seems painless right now but the effects are debilitating.

The less we know that there is anything wrong with us, the more full-blown our spiritual leprosy really is. Are you saying, "I'm OK" while the death of leprosy is spreading in your soul? Do you, like this leper, see your real condition? Do you, like him, see Jesus as your only hope? Will you come to him and plead for mercy.

This leper said, "If you will, you can make me clean." Those who see themselves as full of the spiritual leprosy of sin don't have to wonder any longer if Jesus wills us to make us clean. That is no longer a question. It is a certainty.

"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

"This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

The Savior's Pity

As if the approach of this leper toward Jesus was not scandalous and shocking enough, next we see the surprising and unpredictable response of Jesus toward him. *"Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I will; be clean.'" (Mark 1:41).* Instead of turning away from the leper, Jesus incredibly moves toward him. Jesus' heart was touched and then he touched the untouchable! A perfect and pure Savior touches a putrefying sinner.

First, Christ was moved with pity in his heart! Why? Because He is God and God is a God of compassion, tenderness, kindness, and mercy!

One stands amazed at the number of times this compassion of Jesus, this tenderness or outpouring of his heart in words and deeds of sympathy, is mentioned in the Gospels. He is constantly taking the condition of the afflicted ones "to heart." (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mark 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13). Living in the midst of a people who were placing all the emphasis on legal trivialities, which was true especially of the leaders, he stands out as the One whose emphasis is on "the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23). The sorrows of the people are his own sorrows.

And Jesus is full of compassion toward you and me! Take this to your heart and hold it there for a moment! Jesus Christ, the Servant and the Suffering Savior, has compassion for the leprosy, for the sin, of your heart. He doesn't merely understand, he feels the weight of your sin! He felt it on the Cross! Friend, there is someone who compassionately, with sovereign love, feels with you for the effects of sin in your life. He is eager to help us who are burdened with sin.

He has taken our infirmities upon Himself and carried our diseases! Do you see that? For Jesus was not simply moved in his heart, he moved toward the leper in touch! “He stretched out his hand and touched him”, that is he took hold on him. This wasn't just a little pat or a poke. This was a firm grip!

What, does Jesus know what He is doing here? You aren't supposed to do that Jesus? No Jew who wanted to be ceremonially clean would do this? And no self-respecting rabbi certainly would. Oh no, the rabbis would talk about how they wouldn't even purchase eggs from a vendor on a street where a leper had walked. Others would go further, they would throw stones at lepers. But Jesus placed love above ritual and regulation.

He touched him! That was the first touch that leper had probably experienced in years! Oh, here is sovereign love in action! How often are we moved in our hearts but we don't reach out and touch someone's life in some way. Consider Jesus' touches in Mark:

- When Christ took her Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and raised her up when he healed her (1:31).
- He laid his hand on the leper (1:41).
- When he healed Jarius's little daughter, he took her by the hand and said, “*Talitha koum!*” (which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, get up!’)” (5:41).
- Next He “lay his hands on a few sick people and healed them” (6:5).
- When he encountered the deaf and dumb man, the Apostle Mark says, “Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. (7:33). Later he did almost the same thing for the blind man at Bethsaida (8:23).
- In the midst of his busy ministry, he repeatedly took little children in his arms (9:36 and 10:16).
- Finally we see him raising up the formerly demonized boy (9:27).¹

Calvin says, ““By his word alone he might have healed the *leper*; but he applied, at the same time, the touch of his hand, to express the feeling of compassion. Nor ought this to excite our wonder, since he chose to take upon him our flesh, that he might cleanse us from our sins.”

Many years ago the Prince of Wales visited India. A formidable barrier had been set up to keep back the masses of people who wanted to catch a glimpse of royalty. When the prince arrived, he shook hands with some of the dignitaries who were presented to him. Then, looking over their heads to the crowds beyond, he said, “Take down those barriers.” They were quickly removed and all of the

¹ Hughes, R. K. (1989). *Mark : Jesus, servant and savior*. Preaching the Word (57–58). Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books.

people, regardless of social rank, had free access to the heir to the British throne. Some time later when the prince came to that district again, ten thousand outcasts waited under a banner inscribed with the words, "The Prince of the Outcasts." What the Prince of Wales did in that moment sounds very much like what Jesus would have done in the same situation. He was a king to be sure but a king who demonstrated his power through service to his people.

This was the touch of identification and compassion. This is what Jesus did for us when He came in the flesh—in regard for our sin. "*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,*" (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus came in the flesh, touched lives, and healed us. He who knew no sin became sin for us that we might be cleansed and have the righteousness of God!

Here's another application. We will never impact others unless there is contact and identification with them. A touch, caring involvement in another's life, often must precede the communication of truth. We can't remain aloof and fear being tainted. We must engage with compassion needy souls.

Next, hear the Savior's proclamation: "And he said to him, I will, be clean!" Sovereign love and sovereign power meet and produce cleansing!

"And immediately [there's the word again] the leprosy left him. And he was clean!" Toes grow back, stumps grow fingers, hair returns, he has definable ears, His skin is tanned. There's his nose. His throat is no longer constricted so his voice sounds normal. Eyes that were sunken now sparkle. And no rehab! And instead of shouting "Unclean, unclean!" He screams, "Clean! I'm clean!"

This man passes from a living death, from being a rotting corpse, to become a vibrant member of the community once again. Complete healing, new life! And so it is with every sin who believes the words of Jesus, who comes to Jesus and says, "Lord, please forgive my sin! Give me your life! I am yours! I repent of my sin and trust fully in Christ's sacrifice!" Jesus promises "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*" (John 5:24)

The Sinner's Presumption

Now, notice what happens next. "*And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, "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 1:43-44)

The word "sternly charged" has the connotation of "snorting." Jesus is showing strong emotion here. The word "sent away" is a forceful expression meaning "he

sent this guy packing.” All this suggests that Jesus is expressing righteous anger for he knows this man will disobey Him.

He tells the man, “Make sure you don't tell anyone what has happened to you until you first go to the priest and fulfill the requirements given to you in the law I gave to Moses.” Why did Jesus say this? He has said it before and he will say it again (see 1:24, 34, 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:25). We can understand why he might command **demons** to be silent, but why does he tell this former **leper**, many other people including the parents of a **12-year old girl**, the **blind**, and the **deaf** man whom he healed to “not tell anyone.” It was likely because **Jesus didn't want the reputation of a miracle-worker**. Rather he wanted to be known as **a preacher of good news** and he knew that if this man went and told everyone that his ability to get out his clear message of salvation would be impaired.

So he tells this healed leper to travel 90 miles to Jerusalem and show himself to the priests on duty there. Jesus is telling the man to obey the Scriptures—the ritual for being declared clean from leprosy found in Leviticus 14.

There were about 20,000 men who served as priests in a given year during Jesus' time on earth. There were full time priests, but the majority of these priests served two weeks out of the year, one week at a time twice a year. All 20,000 were expected to report during the three major festivals each year as well—so they served there in Jerusalem about 6 weeks out of the year. The rest of the year they lived in their hometowns and earned a living as scribes, judges or magistrates. While on duty, they officiated at worship, burned incense, offered sacrifices and offering, which involved a lot of butchering.

Here's what this cleansed leper needed to do. He would go to the priest and present two birds, one of which was killed at the temple. The priest would take the blood from slain bird along with cedar, scarlet, and hyssop and dip living bird in it and then that bird was released. The former leper then washes himself, clothes, shaves and then he is reexamined eight days later. If declared clean, he then offered three lambs--a sin offering, a guilt offering, a whole offering— along with 3/10ths of an amount of flour mingled with oil and the restored leper is then touched on the tip of the right ear, the right thumb and the right great toe with mixture of blood and oil. Leviticus 14:10-11).

Jesus honors the OT Law. Remember, he came not to abolish it, but to fulfill it. Also its' fascinating that he tells this man to do all this “for a proof” to the priests—a testimony that Jesus actually healed this man, not simply cleansed him.

But what does this man do? We don't know if ever obeyed Jesus' positive command to go to Jerusalem or not. We do know he disregarded Jesus' first

command because “he went out and began to talk freely about it [and kept on doing this probably with a good bit of animation].”

Now Jesus' instructions were certainly counterintuitive. And this man does what each one of us would have likely done. This man may have thought, “Oh, Jesus is just trying to be modest! I understand his humility.” I'm sure the man started telling everyone out of gratefulness and love for Jesus. Was this leper than truly converted? I don't know. I do know that the test of true salvation is obedience. Not perfect obedience, but a life committed to obeying God. “If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples” Jesus said (John 8:31).

We do know this: Regardless of motive, disobedience to the express command of Jesus Christ, is clearly wrong. It is never right to do wrong to do right.

The Savior's Predicament

What was the result of this leper's disobedience to the clear command of Jesus? “Jesus could no longer openly enter a town.” Jesus had alleviated a huge burden from the leper and now the leper's actions imposes a burden on Jesus! So now Jesus is out in the desolate places.

Do you see the irony in all of this? James Edwards provides this masterful insight:

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 (Isa 53:11) and whose bearing of them causes him to be “numbered with the transgressors” (Isa 53:12)

And I think that's a metaphor in closing for what He did at the cross, is it not? We are the spiritual lepers who lived in alienation and isolation from God. We met Him, we were brought into the presence of God in the Kingdom. But the only way we could ever be taken from our isolation and brought into the presence of God was if He left the presence of God and went Himself into isolation. And that's what He did on the cross because Jesus was forsaken, because Jesus was treated as an outcast we are accepted and welcomed into the presence of God. So here you see in this one little healing, Mark uses language that really irresistibly draws us to the fact that Jesus takes the place of sinners.

What can we tak away from this fascinating short story?

First, if you realize that the leprosy of sin has infected your person, then you have no doubt that you are a sinner. If you believe that, there is no reason why you should not go immediately to him. He has compassion, he *feels* for you heart for heart, blood for blood. More, he will actually *touch* your leprosy. He will take hold of it. Even better, you will be immediately healed! Can you humble yourself to say, “I know you are willing, make me clean”? Then do it now.

Secondly, for those who have been cleansed by Jesus' blood, there is no decree to hide this work of God from the world. Rather, you and I are commanded to go make it known to those around us and in all the world. Think about this: This man was told not to tell anyone and he disobeyed. Christ commands us to go and make the gospel known and yet are we not just as guilty at times of disobedience, as the leper was, when we are silent. Let us go forth, tell our friends the great things the Lord has done for us and how He has seen our plight, was moved with compassion, sent His Son to touch our lives, and has proclaimed that all who repent and believe in His name will be cleansed from sin!