

The Lord and the Leper

Luke 5:12-16

Each evening, dusty shafts of sunlight slanted down through the trees. Then in a soft, green twilight, Adam would walk with God.

That is the way it began. One man and God.

It was the same with Noah. God spoke to him one-on-one. And when Abraham was still in the bustling business city of Ur, God called and commanded him to seek a city he had never seen. One on one.

It was the same with David and Daniel, Elijah and Isaiah. One man and God.

It has always been that way. At Nazareth, God sent an angel to deliver a glorious message to one young woman named Mary. One woman and God.

And on the road to Damascus, God's blessed Son spoke to one man, Saul of Tarsus. Others heard the sound of the voice but could not make out the words, because God always deals with human beings one on one.

It will be the same at the end of time. Even then God will deal with one here and another there.

Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. Matthew 24:40-41

When this world is lost in the mists of memory, there will be a new earth and a new heaven. But one thing will not be changed. Even when men must stand before God's great and terrible judgement seat, they will stand there all alone.

Only John omits this little story. It is an isolated incident, a momentary pause in a busy day.

Matthew remembered the Redeemer was walking down a hill just outside some unnamed Galilean town. It was there that our Lord met a man in rags.

Unwashed, unkempt, and unloved, he lived alone outside of human habitation. When darkness shrouded his world, he found an oak tree or a hollow beneath a hill where he could curl up for a few hours of sleep.

Few people wasted pity on the man. Fear crowded out all compassion. His disease was highly contagious.

Then for a few moments, God's Word cropped out everyone else in all the world. And once again, it was as it was in the beginning.

One man and God.

The Plague

There must have been watchers that day. After all, four fishermen had already abandoned their nets to follow Jesus. And the Gospel accounts are so vivid, so lifelike, they have to be first hand observations.

And those who watched were horrified. The man was not only dangerous. He was disgusting to look upon. He was diseased with leprosy and doomed to die by excruciating inches.

Throughout the Bible, leprosy is used as an illustration, a symbol and a sign for sin. That is clear in the vocabulary God's Word uses to describe the healing of lepers. They were *cleansed* not cured.

Leprosy is an apt illustration of sin, too. It was a progressive disease. Like sin, leprosy did not seem to be that big a problem at the beginning. It started as a pale patch of skin that festered into a small sore.

But it did not stay small; it spread. And so does sin. We might indulge a desire, believing we can control it. But we cannot.

Sin always spreads. It seeps into our minds and emotions, our attitudes and aspirations. Before we know it, sin is our master. And we are its slave.

Leprosy also isolated those who were plagued by it. The Law demanded that anyone who was diseased with leprosy live outside any city or settlement.

So lepers lived alone. Their disease walled them away from everyone else. And sin does the same thing.

When it is unforsaken and unconfessed, sin always drives a wedge into relationships. It separates husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and families.

Even in Hell there is no fellowship, no warm human companionship. The smoldering sulphur in the lake of fire gives off great smoke and intense heat but little light. So even in our agony, our sin maroons us in misery.

Leprosy was a terminal disease, too. And once again, so is sin. God is definite about that. He says it again and again. Sin always leads to death.

The soul who sins will die. Ezekiel 18:4

...those who practice such things are worthy of death, Romans 1:32

...the outcome of those things is death, Romans 6:21

For the wages of sin is death, Romans 6:23

...if you live according to the flesh you will die, Romans 8:13 (ESV)

The man who met Jesus on the hillside knew his disease of leprosy was deadly. He learned that the hard way.

Some sinners learn the hard way, too. There are no atheists in hell. Neither are there cynics who sneer at the warnings in God's Word. In their agony, they have learned life's lessons too late.

But it was not too late for the leper. And it is not too late for us.

The Plea

Luke watched the world through the eyes of a physician. And every account he heard about this leprous man confirmed the disease was in an advanced stage.

While He was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. Verse 12 (ESV)

The man did not have a few sores here and there. He was full of leprosy. His body was saturated and soaked through with the disease.

Maybe that is the beginning of wisdom for anyone who would find freedom and forgiveness from sin. We must first realize that sin is more than merely a problem. We are polluted with it. The man in Luke's story was full of leprosy. And we are full of sin.

There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands; There is none seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one. Romans 3:10-12

The man in Luke's gospel account did not offer Jesus anything at all. He came with neither promises nor persuasion. He knew he had nothing to offer God's sinless Son.

And we are every bit impoverished as he was. Our spiritual poverty is absolute. There is nothing in all our lives we can lift up to God as worthy of His praise.

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; Isaiah 64:6 (NIV)

We are like one who is diseased with leprosy. At our very best, we are still polluted with sin. Even our most righteous acts are poisoned by selfishness and sin.

The leper understood he had nothing to offer Jesus. So he did what we must do.

...when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." Verse 12

The leper he fell on his face before Jesus. He forgot all about pride and personal dignity and pleaded with Jesus.

That is what we must do. We dare not treat the high and holy God of eternity like a business executive. Coming to Christ is not making an appointment and sitting down in a comfortable chair in an air conditioned office. It is nothing at all like a dignified, man-to-man talk.

If we are to be cleansed of our sin, if we are to be touched and transformed by Jesus Christ, we must fall down before Him. He is more than merely a Master. Even more than a Savior. He is God. And we must come to Him as those whose spiritual poverty is profound and whose moral purity is polluted and poisoned by sin.

The man knew he had no right to come to Christ. But still he came. And so must we. However, the leper did come armed with one asset. He came with faith.

The man knew Jesus had the power to completely cleanse him of his leprosy. So he did not say he *believed* Christ could cleanse him. He was sure of it; He knew Jesus could help him.

And we have every reason in the world to know for sure that Jesus has the power to fully and forever free us of our slavery to sin, to cleanse us from its stain and deliver us from its condemnation.

Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us. Beaten, battered and bruised, our Lord was nailed to a cross to pay the penalty for our sins. And His blood can completely cleanse us from any and every sin we have committed.

...the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. 1 John 1:7

We have not sinned for too long a time. Neither are our sins so sordid and shameless or so disgusting and despicable that Christ cannot cleanse them away.

He is able to deliver. The leper knew that. He had no doubts about Jesus' ability. But he did have doubts. He wondered about the Master's willingness.

But he really had no reason to entertain such doubts. The Scriptures continually describe God as a Lord of love and compassion. On every page, we read of our Lord's lovingkindness, His goodness and mercy.

So we have no reason to wonder if God is willing to save us from our sins. In His Word, our Lord pleads with us to come to Him that He might forgive us.

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord, "though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool." Isaiah 1:18

Peter was one of the watchers that day. Years later when he was old and an experienced missionary, he wrote about what he knew about the Lord he loved and lived for.

The Lord is...not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9 (NKJV)

The leper did not know for sure that Jesus was willing to help and to heal him. So the Savior did something no one had done for long years. Jesus touched him.

He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the leprosy left him. Verse 13

One reason the leper was cleansed was because he was weary of being unclean. He was quite simply unwilling to live and die with his disease.

And if we are to be cleansed from our disease of sin, we must be every bit as dissatisfied as he was. We must hunger and thirst for forgiveness. We must be so weary of our guilt, we are unwilling to go living in sin.

It cannot be a casual desire, either. We must want to be forgiven with every thread and fiber of our being. Only then will we be cleansed.

The Proof

The man looked at his hands in disbelief. His fingers had been eaten away to oozing, bloody stumps. But his hands were whole again.

For long years, pain had been the man's only companion. Waking and sleeping, his body hurt. But now his skin was no longer swollen with sores. And he felt not pain at all.

The man wanted to run home and find his family. But he was suddenly sobered by Christ's commands.

And He ordered him to tell no one, "But go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." Verse 14

Years before, the man traveled to Jerusalem. He had an odd sore that did not seem to heal. So he showed it to the priest.

The priest was an old man with a long, carefully combed beard. He squinted at the sore and shook his head. It was leprosy.

From that moment on, the man had lived alone. When anyone did approach him, he cried out, "Unclean! Unclean!"

But now he was clean, completely cleansed of his dread disease. And since the priest had diagnosed the disease, he was also the one who must now declare the man really was whole and healthy again.

But that was not all Christ commanded the man to do. He was also to present the offerings the Law of Moses demanded.

It was not an expensive offering. Anyone who had been cured of leprosy was to bring two doves to the temple priests.

Our God is fond of object lessons. And the ritual offering for cured lepers was a wonderful story in symbols.

Both of the birds were to be brought to the temple as sacrifices. But only one of them would die.

That bird was killed in a bowl to catch its blood. Then the other bird was dipped in that blood.

Finally, the live bird was taken out to an open field. The priest would throw it into the air. And it would fly away, still stained by the blood of the other bird.

In that sacrifice, we who trust in Jesus are the live bird. We were condemned to death by our sins. But God's own beloved Son shed His blood, so we would not have to shed ours. He gave His life, so we would not have to forfeit ours.

When we trust in His Son, our loving Heavenly Father sets us forever free to live in His satisfaction and serenity. And like the bird, our souls are forever covered with Jesus' blood.

We must never forget that. We who claim Christ as King are only free and forgiven because our Lord died for us.

Yes, the sacrifice was a glorious story in symbols. But there was one small problem.

Jerusalem was far to the south in Judea. And traveling there was a long, exhausting ordeal. It required a week-long hike.

And while he was on that trip, Jesus had yet another command the man was to remember and obey. He was to keep his cleansing a secret. He was not to tell anyone he met on the way to Jerusalem that Jesus had cleansed him of leprosy.

Our Lord did not bother to tell the man why he was to remain silent. And quite often, our Savior does not tell us the reasons behind the commands He has left us in His Holy Word.

But then, the man did not really need to know why. And we do not either. Like that man, we are obligated by gratitude and love to do what our blessed Savior commands us to do.

After all, He gave His life for us. He reached down and touched us when we were without hope and without help. He transformed us from slaves of sin to sons of God. The least we can do is lovingly and faithfully do what He asks of us.

Our Lord was not being harsh or legalistic by asking the leper to keep silent. Christ knew that only by obeying God's Word would the man's witness be worthy.

The man was not to keep silent forever, of course. Once his healing had been confirmed by a priest, he was free to tell anyone and everyone. After all, if he did not withhold his witness until after he saw the priest, skeptics and cynics would say he had not really been cleansed at all.

Or they would simply say the man never really had leprosy in the first place, or he had been healed by Satan's power, not God's. And seeds of doubt would drown out the wonderful witness of the power and pity of Jesus Christ.

Obedience to God's Word is always the most powerful proof we really have been delivered from the darkness, despair and death of sin. That is one reason why we cannot continue to live in the same sin Christ cleansed away if claim Him as our Savior and Lord.

Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity. 2 Timothy 2:19 (ESV)

We do not know if the man went to the priest and offered the sacrifices. But we do know he did not obey Christ's commands. Instead, he told everyone about the wonderful things the Master had done for him.

But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere. Mark 1:45

The Lord left Capernaum to preach about life and light and love to people in darkness. But now he was suddenly swamped with sick people.

His every waking hour was spent healing, not preaching. Worse yet, a hornet's nest of opposition from the ruling Jews was stirred up. So He had to stay outside cities where His enemies were watching for Him..

Our Master's ministry was made a great deal more difficult simply because one man refused to obey Christ's commandments. The damage was done, not by God's enemies, but by His own child.

Tragically, that is often the case. Like that leper, our enthusiasm and intentions might be good. But the truth is, all too often we think we know better than God. So we do things our way rather than His.

The result is always the same when we do that. Christ's cause is crippled. Our Gospel witness is weakened. And the Savior's enemies are strengthened.

We who belong to Jesus Christ, owe everything we are and everything we have to Him. We owe Him love and loyalty.

But more than anything else, we owe Him obedience.