

# The Touch of the Servant's Hand

## Mark 1:40-45

In his book, 'the knowledge of the Holy' A. W. Tozer wrote that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. When you think about God, what comes into your mind? Do you think about His love and compassion? Jesus Christ came to this earth so that we could know God. And one of the things we clearly see about Jesus, one thing He shows us about God's character is His compassion.

Today we will see how Jesus responded to a leper. For a Jew, leprosy was the ultimate in uncleanness. And this incident will leave us with a couple of lessons -- one that has to do with how we ought to treat those around us that are in less than desirable circumstances. The other lesson has to do with the realization that Jesus is willing to cleanse us, just as he did the leper, when we humbly come to him.

The story begins in **Mark 1:40**:

- 40 Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean."**
- 41 Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed."**
- 42 As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.**
- 43 And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once,**
- 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."**
- 45 However, he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the matter, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction.**

Here was a man who had leprosy. Now in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, the word "leprosy" is a broad term which includes a wide range of skin diseases. The very worst of those diseases was what we know as leprosy today, a condition which is also called "Hanson's Disease". We don't know how severe the problem of this particular leper was, but let's assume he had modern leprosy.

It's a horrible disease. It usually begins with little white specks on the eyelids or on the palms of the hands. Then it spreads over the body. It often bleaches the hair white. It covers the skin with nodules, scales, and oozing sores.

But that's just what happens on the surface. Down under the skin, leprosy eats its way through the nerves. And soon the victim loses all sense of touch and pain, initially in the fingers and toes, then spreading up the arms and legs. So, a leper can't feel anything. That may not sound so bad. The last time you stubbed your toe when you trip over a chair on your way back to bed, you probably wished that you didn't feel anything. Or the last time you hit your thumb with a

hammer or burned yourself on a hot pot. But what sounds like it might be nice is absolutely horrible. Because without the sense of touch, a person with leprosy eventually damages his toes, fingers, and feet. He will bump into objects, cut himself, get infections -- and not even notice.

When we were in Nepal, we visited the leprosy hospital. Many of the leprosy affected patients were missing fingers and toes. Some had even had rats chew off their fingers and toes at night -- but the victims didn't wake up, because they didn't feel anything.

So as leprosy advances, a leper doesn't even look human. No fingers. No toes. Many of them blind. Ulcerated growth all over their face. Nobody wants to get near them, nobody wants to touch them. A leper becomes utterly repulsive -- both to himself and to others.

Even today many who have this disease are shunned by their families. They are outcasts from society. Many people are still very afraid of this disease. It might surprise you to know that leprosy is not regarded as highly contagious disease. And today, leprosy can be treated with drugs, and it can be cured, although not all the affects of the disease can be reversed.

But there was no cure in Bible days. And so the Old Testament sets forth some very strict instructions regarding those who had the disease because there was no other way to slow the spread of a disease that led to such horrible results.

The society in which Jesus lived went to great lengths to separate the clean from the unclean. There were clear-cut boundaries between the two.

In Leviticus, leprosy is the most serious of all forms of uncleanness. Some forms of uncleanness -- such as the result of touching an unclean animal -- were cleansed simply by waiting until evening and washing. Other forms of uncleanness, such as the result of childbirth, required a longer waiting period and the offering of a sacrifice.

But leprosy was much different. You see, all the other forms of uncleanness required that the person stay away from the temple, but leprosy required the person to live outside the camp, to be utterly cut off from the congregation of Israel. Leviticus 13:45-46 says,

**"Now the leper on whom the sore is, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare; and he shall cover his mustache, and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall be unclean. All the days he has the sore he shall be unclean. He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."**

The leper dressed like a mourner going to a burial service -- his own burial service. And he had to constantly cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" to keep anyone from getting too close.

And so, you can imagine that as this leper walked down the street, he was shunned. Little children looked at him, got scared, and ran away. Older children kept their distance by throwing rocks at him and making cutting remarks. Adults walked on the other side of the street, shaking their heads in disgust or just looking away.

A leper had to live in exile from the mainstream of society. He was excluded from the sacrifices, religious festivals and worship services. In many ways, he was not only separated from God's people; he was separated from God.

And so there he lives outside the city. Without love. Without hope. Without the simple joys and dignities of life. As I read about this leper in Mark 1, I wonder. How long has it been since someone has shaken his hand, patted him on the back, put an arm around his waist, hugged him, touched his cheek, wiped a tear from his eye, or kissed him? The truth is, all those things were merely a memory for him.

But one day he heard that Jesus was in town. Jesus, the one some said was the Messiah. The one who heals the sick, makes the lame walk, and opens the eyes of the blind. And so, the leper comes to him, and our story begins.

## I. The Request of the Leper

**"Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, 'If You are willing, You can make me clean.'" (Mark 1:40).**

Notice that Jesus doesn't come to the leper -- the leper comes to Jesus. Remember that this was a violation of the rules and regulations concerning lepers. He was supposed to shout, "Unclean!" to keep Jesus away! But instead he runs to Jesus. And Jesus does not run away like all the rest. Jesus allows the leper to approach him.

It's also significant what the leper says to Jesus. He doesn't say, "Heal my disease." He says, **"Make me clean."** While those two things may seem to be one and the same, there's a subtle but significant difference. You see, this leper's disease was what caused him a great deal of physical distress, but it was his uncleanness which separated him from God's people.

I think there is within this leper's request a cry. He's saying, "I want to worship God!" "I want to be a part of God's people!" "I want to sit in the synagogue and sing with the others!" "I want to touch people!" "I want to be clean!"

That's what the leper is asking for. Now, of course he wants physical healing. But becoming clean is much more than just becoming healed!

And so the leper falls on his knees before Jesus, and begs him, pleads with him, saying, **"If you are willing, you can make me clean."** His words tell us three things about this leper.

First of all, he knows he can't heal himself or make himself clean. He probably has never even heard of a leper being cured. For years he has lived with no hope at all. He's absolutely helpless, and he knows it.

Secondly, he believes in Jesus' power. He says, **"You can make me clean."** He believes with all his heart that Jesus is the one person in all the world who can cleanse him. And notice it's not just, "You can heal leprosy", but "You can do it for me." Sometimes we believe that God is able to help everyone else no matter how great their problems may be, but we're not so sure that he can do anything for us.

Thirdly, he shows submission to God's will. This leper says, **"If you will, you can make me clean."** He had no idea if Jesus was willing or not. But his request

showed a certain level of spiritual maturity. No doubt this man desperately wanted to be clean. Yet he left it in the hands of the Son of God. He knows it is up to Jesus. He makes no demands. He has no basis for his request, other than Jesus' mercy and goodness.

And what was the response of Jesus to this man's cry for help?

## II. Response of Christ

**"Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed."** (Mark 1:41)

Jesus granted the leper's request. Not slowly or in stages over a number of days, but **"immediately,"** right then and there the leprosy left him. Now I want us to notice a couple of significant phrases about Jesus here.

First of all, we read Jesus was **"moved with compassion"**. It wasn't just that Jesus looked at him and said, "You need something, I've got it. Come here. OK, now you're better." No, the word **"compassion"** suggests a depth of feeling. In fact, the word "compassion" literally means "to feel with." Ten times in the gospels, we are told that Jesus had compassion on the people around him.

What that means is that Jesus hurt when people around him hurt. It bothered him to see people suffering and in need. It touched his heart when someone came to him and said, "Please help me."

Don't be in too much of a hurry to get beyond this point. I know it's easy to say, "Yes, Jesus cared. Of course, he cared." Don't take it for granted. Think for a moment about the other religious leaders of that day -- the Pharisees, the priests and Levites -- and how they were much more concerned about being religious than they were about caring. In story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus painted a picture of the typical attitude of his day.

But it's not just his day. Think for a moment about us. Let's be honest. It's so easy not to care. We see so much suffering, so much pain. And it's easy, if we're not careful, to build a shell and shield ourselves from the suffering around us, to become hardened and callused. That's one thing Jesus refused to do.

And I'm so thankful for that. The writer of Hebrews talks about how significant that point is: **"For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses...Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."** (Hebrews 4:15-16).

The fact that Jesus cared about people while he was on this earth gives us the assurance that he cares about us right now.

But there's something else in this story that I want you to notice: **"Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him."**

Jesus touched him! When do you suppose was the last time someone had touched this leper? Remember that this man was physically and spiritually unclean. To touch such a one would be the last thing any Jew would want to do.

Only one person could touch him according to the Old Testament law - the High Priest. And he could touch him only when he had been healed. The touch of the priest would pronounce that he was clean.

So there is something spiritually significant about Jesus' touch because he is our High Priest. But I think it's much more than that. Jesus certainly could have healed this man from a distance, but he knew that this man needed the physical closeness of another human being just as much as he needed to be rid of his leprosy.

And what was the result of Jesus' touch? Verse 42: **"Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed."**

Notice that there are two results: Jesus healed the disease and he cleansed the leper. He healed him -- that's physical. And he was cleansed -- that's spiritual.

This man wanted to worship God, and Jesus gave him the ability to do that. He wanted to be a part of God's people, and Jesus gave him that. He wanted to be able to touch others, to have a close relationship with the people of God, and Jesus made that possible.

Conclusion:

There are two applications I want to leave with you this morning.

First of all, I want us to come away from this lesson with an appreciation for the compassion Jesus showed, and a commitment to be a people of compassion as we deal with the lepers all around us. I don't mean people who actually have the disease of leprosy. I understand there are over 12 million people in the world who do have it, but chances are you don't know any of them. But I suspect you do know someone who suffers in a way similar to that leper.

Because, in our contemporary society, we also have our own "unclean" people. Although they may not be lepers, they may feel that way because of how they are treated by the so-called "clean" people in our society. If you talk with someone who has AIDS or cancer, or maybe even the mentally and physically handicapped, or those in a nursing home, you will likely find that these are people who sometimes feel like that leper Jesus met -- very alone and forgotten by the mainstream of society. It's not just the physical suffering, though there may be plenty of that. It's the isolation, the loneliness, the feeling that nobody wants to be around them. When's the last time you made the effort to reach and touch someone like that?

As the body of Christ, we need to be a people of compassion. I realize we can't take personal responsibility for every tragedy we see, but neither can we afford to shut our eyes to the fact that these situations really exist and that there are people all around who have physical needs, but much more than that they just need to know that someone cares. I challenge you to leave this building with the commitment to be more like Jesus in the compassion you show.

Secondly, I want us to come away from this story about the leper with the realization that Jesus still has the power to cleanse. In many ways, sin is like leprosy. Like sin, leprosy is deeper than the skin (Lev 13:3). It spreads (Lev. 13:5-8). Sin does its worst damage by eating away at us, penetrating deep inside, causing us eventually to lose all feeling toward those things that are good

and right. Sin will cause us to be isolated from God's people, from God himself. And eventually, like leprosy, sin will destroy.

And a more important similarity -- just like the leper, there's nothing we can do to get rid of sin by ourselves. All we can do is to come to Jesus, as this leper did, and say, "I want to be cleansed."

In verse 44 Jesus told the man, **"See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."**

In the OT book of Leviticus (ch. 14), if a leper was cleansed, there was an offering to be made. The one healed was examined by the priest, who would take two clean birds, kill 1 over a bowl of water, and let the blood drip into the water. Then he would take the living pigeon, and take a brush made of a hyssop bush and dip it into the blood and the water, and sprinkle it upon the living pigeon. Then he would take that pigeon to an open field and release it, and as it flew away, the priest would sprinkle that blood and water over the leper. Then the leper was to be shaved and bathed. A week later two lambs were sacrificed for him. Lamb's blood was then put on the leper's ear, thumb, and big toe signifying that his life had been cleansed.

Why was all this required? It was intended to be a picture of the future work of Christ...dying for us, shedding His blood, being raised from the dead, ascending back to heaven, and cleansing the leprosy of sin by His blood!

If you feel alone, isolated, hurt, shut out or unworthy this morning. Will you do what the leper did? Will you forget all the barriers, will you run to Jesus, will you fall down before him and ask him to heal you, to cleanse you, to touch you?