

# Be Clean

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>12</sup> While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." <sup>13</sup> And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him. <sup>14</sup> And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them." <sup>15</sup> But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. <sup>16</sup> But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. (Luke 5:12–16)

## (1) A Desperate Leper (v. 12)

### The Past Is a Foreign Country

- A. The world of the Bible doesn't come alive until you put yourself in it, and putting yourself in it oftentimes takes a little work. I was reminded this last week of the famous words of British writer L.P. Hartely: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."
  - 1. And just as we would prepare ourselves for travel to a foreign country lest things go dreadfully wrong (we don't have the right currency, we don't have a place to stay, we don't know how to ask: "Where is the bathroom?" in the common language, etc.), so we must also do a little work to understand the foreign country of the Bible if we are to get the most out of our visit.
- B. So I want to know: What was this man dealing with? What was he thinking, feeling, experiencing? What does it mean to be a leper in first century Israel?
  - 1. Only when we understand this will we be able to identify with him. Only then will Christ's response send chills down our spine, as well it should!

### What Is "Leprosy"?

- A. Before we can begin to understand what this man must be dealing with, we must try to determine what this "leprosy" actually is. And we find that it is a bit harder to define than we first might think.
  - 1. We immediately think of leprosy as we know it today, also called Hansen's Disease. It is a horrible thing—involving disfiguring skin sores and severe nerve damage that can leave a person curled up in a heap when it's through with you.

- a. It is thought that the Greek word used by Luke here (lepra) very well might have Hansen’s Disease within its range of meaning. But it is also a bit broader. That is why, though the ESV translates the Greek as “leprosy” here, they are careful to add the footnote: “Leprosy was a term for several skin diseases.”
- B. Lev 13 is the place where this is outlined for us in fullest detail. Here we see that what the ancients defined as leprosy covers skin diseases with a wide variety of symptoms including spots (v. 2), boils (v. 18), burns (v. 24), itches (v. 30), and scalp conditions (v. 42).
- 1. If these things appeared to go deeper than the skin (v. 3), they were identified as leprosy.

### Three Layers of Ostracism

- A. Whatever this disease might be, we can be sure about one thing: the individuals who suffered from it were forced to deal with three agonizing layers of ostracism (of exclusion and isolation).

#### (1) Ostracism from Body

- A. First, we must understand that they were in some way ostracized from their own body. It’s broken. It seems to be working against you, as if the body is evicting the soul.
- 1. While there must have been a variety of physical effects, we know that leprosy could be deathly serious. For in Num 12:12, when Aaron is interceding for his sister Miriam after she’d been struck with leprosy on account of her sin, he says this: “Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away.”
- B. And so we wonder what sort of physical trauma this man had been dealing with and for how long?!

#### (2) Ostracism from Society

- A. But there is yet a second layer of ostracism: ostracism from society.
- B. A person who suffered from such a thing was to present himself to a priest for examination. And, if it was in fact a case of leprosy, then the priest would “pronounce him unclean” (Lev 13:3).
- 1. And with this pronouncement comes the next layer of ostracism. For here we understand the individual not just to be unwell, but to be unclean.
    - a. This is not a physical or hygienic category (as if the man just needs a bath or something), it is a ritual and religious one. It means that the person is no longer fit to fellowship with the holy nation of Israel.

- C. For this reason we read in Lev 13:45-46: “<sup>45</sup> 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.’<sup>46</sup> 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.”
1. Moving back up these verses, the leper must live outside the camp, living alone, tearing his clothes and making his appearance as haggard as possible so that people know not to approach. And if they do approach, he must yell out: “Unclean, unclean”, as if to say: “Get away from me or you will be contaminated to!”
- D. All of this sparks one commentator to write: “The social consequences of leprosy were perhaps worse than the illness itself, however. Leprosy was a sentence of social ostracism. The disease deprived victims not only of health, but of their names, occupations, social habits, families, fellowship, and worshiping communities. Leprosy contaminated Israel’s status as a holy people . . . . Other illnesses had to be healed, but leprosy had to be cleansed . . . . Josephus [the Jewish historian] speaks of the banishment of lepers as those ‘in no way differing from a corpse’ (Ant. 3.264)” (PNTC).
1. Have you ever heard someone say in the heat of their anger: “You’re dead to me!” Well, though the community might not be saying such a thing in anger to the leper, it is what they must say nonetheless: “You are dead to me.”
- E. What does it feel like to be treated as dead while still alive?!

### (3) Ostracism from God

- A. But I’ve saved the worst layer of ostracism for last. For to be pronounced unclean means that the person is now in some way at odds with the Holy One of Israel, YHWH Himself.
1. The man is not unloved by YHWH but he is unclean. And with that, he is to be excluded not only from the camp of Israel, but most especially from the house of the Lord that is situated at the center of that camp—whether in tabernacle or temple form.
- B. This is why when Uzziah, king of Judah, is struck with leprosy for his arrogance, we read that he had to then live “in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the Lord” (2 Chr 26:21).
1. It’s simple yet painful logic: Leper is unclean; God is holy; therefore, leper can have no fellowship with God. Period.
- C. What does it feel like to have even God keep you at a safe distance away?

### What About You?

- A. Let’s talk about our own ostracisms for a moment. Can you relate to any of these layers?
1. Maybe your body is broken it’s breaking your heart.

2. Maybe you feel all alone in the world. Every social group you ever try to get involved with you just feel like the outsider. Even in the church. You feel like you could die and no one would even notice.
3. Maybe you are sure that God is punishing you for your sin. That He is keeping you at a distance. That you don't belong in His house. You're too unclean.

B. Well, let's sit back and watch what happens next!

## Desperate Times and Desperate Measures

A. With this background in mind, two things ought to immediately stand out at us in [v. 12](#):

1. In the first case, we read that Jesus is "in one of the cities" and it is here that He meets the leper. What is this leper doing in a city? Is he not mandated by the law to remain outside the city?
2. In the second case, we read that the leper "came" to Jesus. What is this leper doing approaching anybody at all? Doesn't he know he must stay at a distance?

B. Well most certainly he does. But he doesn't care! Reports about this Jesus had spread even to the lepers living outside the city gates (cf. [Luke 4:37](#))! And this leper sees Jesus as his last hope of ever being fully human again.

## A Beggar and a Gentlemen

A. Desperate times call for desperate measures so he makes a run on the city, he makes a run on Christ: "And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean'" ([v. 12](#)).

1. This is the only posture a man can take if he is truly to receive from Jesus. It's the posture of the ragged man outside the Shell station holding out a cup for coins. It's the posture of a desperate beggar! "Nothing in my hand I bring, / Simply to the cross I cling; / Naked, come to Thee for dress; / Helpless look to Thee for grace; / Foul, I to the fountain fly; / Wash me, Savior, or I die!" (Rock of Ages).

- a. If you have not gone face-down, palms-up before Jesus, you have not truly come to face Him or yourself rightly!

B. Though he is utterly desperate, he shows remarkable restraint. Though he is a beggar, he's a gentlemen: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." He gives Jesus space. He leaves room for God's will to be different than his own.

1. Perhaps this should wrap us back around to his opening ascription: "Lord!" He knows Jesus to be Lord in some significant way. He is putting himself under Him and trusting Him to do what is right.

- a. There is no question as to Jesus' ability, only submission to Jesus' will.

- C. What about you? Is there an “If You will...” in all your prayers, in all your pleading? Or is there just demand. We’ve all experienced that moment when the beggar outside the Shell station becomes the boss.
  - 1. Is that you? Or do you have an understanding that God might will something different than you and yet still be working and willing for your good? “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

## (2) A Willing Physician (v. 13)

- A. Then we read this in v. 13: “And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.”
- B. There is no way to overstate the miracle of this moment! One commentator reminds us: “People shunned lepers and we are safe in saying that nobody but other lepers had touched this man in years” (TNTC).
  - 1. And yet it wasn’t another leper who touched him here. It wasn’t even really another mere man. It was God come in the flesh who stretched out His hand and cleaned him up!
- C. Throughout the OT, ritual purity moved in the opposite direction. When the clean touched the unclean, it was the uncleanness that spread. But now, in Christ, the dynamic is reversing. The Holy One touches the unclean one and it’s cleanness that’s contagious!
  - 1. In Christ, the holiness of God is not shielded off somewhere deep in the Holy of Holies, it is breaking out and coming for the filthy of this world. He’s coming to touch you and me and bring us back in!
- D. Did you hope for a Christmas text this morning? Something to prepare your heart during this Advent season? Well, here it is! “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him!”
  - 1. That’s the Christmas spirit right there! “Long lay the world in sin and error pining . . .” and then Christ stretched out His hand in the incarnation and touched it, and the world has never been the same since.
- E. What would it be like to look down and watch as your skin turned from flaky, boiling, deformed, half eaten, or whatever, to soft and healthy again?!

## (3) A Gospel Portrait (vv. 14-16)

### The Gospel and Rehumanization

- A. We have here nothing less than a profound picture of the gospel and its effects upon a person. I have spoken before of the gospel as rehumanizing and that is precisely what we see here. A dead man comes alive by the touch and the word of Christ. And in a moment, the layers of ostracism come undone.

1. He is at harmony with his body again; he can enter back into the society—he can hug his wife, and pick up his kids, embrace old friends; and he can come back into the house of God and worship.

## Make an Offering

A. But where Jesus goes next completes the gospel picture for us. For he charges the man in [v. 14](#) to “go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded.”

1. At first it is a perplexing command. Jesus just made Him clean. Why now go and “make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded”?
  - a. Because Jesus doesn’t want this man to forget what the OT made so clear: cleansing can only come through the shedding of blood.

B. It is true, that the OT law held out in stark terms both the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man.

1. God established in Israel a whole system of cleanness and uncleanness as a physical way of keeping ever before them the spiritual realities both of His holiness and man’s sin.
  - a. Sickness and death entered the world because of man’s sin. Leprosy pictures in the body what men truly are in the soul. And so God would consider lepers unclean, unholy, unable to live within the gates and worship within His house.

C. But, in it all, the OT law never stopped beating at the drum of God’s mercy and grace. The law, as Paul says, was “our tutor to lead us to Christ” ([Gal 3:24 NASB](#)). Well, Jesus here wants to make sure this leper, and we, don’t miss its tutelage.

1. Tucked within all the laws concerning leprosy and cleansing is a picture of the grand solution: the cross of Jesus Christ.

D. [Lev 14](#) tells us that when a leper had somehow recovered from and been healed of his leprosy, he would present himself again to a priest for inspection. Then he would begin to make the various offerings required of him. Most intriguing of them all is the offering that begins the whole process: two birds—one slain, the other released.

1. Listen to Spurgeon’s description and interpretation at this point: “First, there was sacrifice. One of the birds was taken, and his blood was shed . . . If sin is put away, it must be by blood. There is no way of putting sin from before the presence of God except by the streams which flow from the open veins of Christ! . . . And then, the second bird was dipped into the blood . . . And when this had been done seven times, . . . the living bird [was] allowed to fly away. This is a lively picture of Christ! As a living bird, He ascends on high after being slain for us—scattering the red drops

of atonement, He rises above the clouds which receive Him out of our sight, and there before His Father's throne, He pleads the full merit of the sacrifice which He offered for us once and for all! The leper was made clean by sacrifice and by resurrection."

- E. Here is how we get back in! The death and resurrection of Christ! Both sides of this are so critical to the gospel healing every leprous sinner desperately needs.
  - 1. His death is the death we deserve—He is ostracized in full from body, society, and God. And His resurrection is the new life we now live in Him, by His Spirit.
    - a. It's to the cross that Jesus is headed, and He doesn't want this leper or us to miss it!

## Two Final Exhortations

- A. With all of this in view, let me close our time together with two final exhortations:

### (1) Come to the Lord!

- A. Are you feeling ostracized from body, society, or even God? Come to the Lord! Cry out in your suffering. Confess your sin. Whatever it is, He will not cast you out. He will not push you away. He will stretch out His hand and touch you, cleanse you!

### (2) Go to the Leper!

- A. In Christ, we are called to courageous compassion. We are no longer scared to touch the untouchable, to love the unlovable, to live among the dead of this world, because life is breaking out of us by the Spirit of the living Christ!
- B. Singer/songwriter Josh Garrels, in an interview with the Huffington Post, issued a charge to the church, and I'll leave you with it here: "During the middle ages, the Black Death plagued all of Europe, killing half of the population. Those with the means ran from the cities to save themselves from the outbreak and contamination. History records tell us that it was the Christians who stayed in the belly of the beast to help the sick and dying, and in doing so became sick and died themselves. I believe to bring restoration to the world the church must be lovingly invested and present everywhere corruption and death are found — whether in war torn countries, broken political and economic systems, sick communities, or our own neighborhoods. . . . The church cannot function as "holier than thou" separatists any longer - disengaging from society so as to not become "contaminated" helps no one. If the heart is clean what are we afraid of? We must go with the grace of God into the darkest, sickest, most dangerous systems, countries, industries, and communities and be both present and active, while staying anchored in the death and resurrection of Christ."