

“The Healer of Hurts”

Mark 1:40-45

Turn with me in your Bibles to the first chapter of Mark, and this morning we’re going to look at verses 40-45 before we observe the Lord’s Supper. John Merrick was a man who lived in 19th-century England and suffered from severe physical deformities that made him almost unrecognizable in appearance. And because of how he looked, he was rejected by society, exploited in sideshows, and treated more like an object than a human being. People didn’t just avoid Merrick—they were repulsed by him. So much so that he was forced to live in isolation, longing for dignity, longing to be seen not as a monster, but as a man. His life is the subject of the movie, “The Elephant Man,” starring Anthony Hopkins. In the movie, there is a deeply moving scene where, after being harassed and gawked at by a crowd at a train station, Merrick cries out, “I am not an animal! I am a human being!” His cry captures the ache of a soul that has been pushed to the margins, cut off from the touch of another human being, starved for compassion and acceptance. Imagine living your entire life without a single touch of kindness—no handshake, no embrace, no reassuring hand on your shoulder. Imagine being seen not as a person, but as a plague. Not as a soul to be loved, but as something to avoid. And it raises a question, what do you do when your hurts are real, your wounds are deep, and you’re not sure God would receive you if you came to Him? Well, that’s exactly what we find here in Mark 1 and the story of a leprous man who approaches Jesus. (Read)

There are somewhere around 20 specific miracles of Jesus that are recorded in Mark’s gospel, four of which are found in this first chapter. Mark records more of Jesus’ miracles than sermons, but that is not to say there is no teaching in Mark. In fact, all of Jesus’ miracles were pictures of what He has come to do. For

example, His opening the eyes of the blind illustrated the way that He illuminates darkened hearts. His calming the storm told of His power to bring peace to troubled hearts. Raising the dead proclaimed His life-giving power, which will ultimately be proven in His own resurrection. His feeding of the 5,000 spoke of Him being the Bread of Life. And when we consider what the Law of Moses said regarding what it was to be a leper, we see that His healing of the leper is a picture of the salvation from sin that Jesus brings. Notice first:

1 – The terrible CONDITION the man faced (1:40)

“And a leper came to Him, imploring Him, and kneeling said to Him, ‘If You will, You can make me clean.’”

By this point, Jesus and His disciples had left Capernaum so that He could preach in the other towns of Galilee. In the gospel of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount comes between what Mark writes in verses 39 and 40. This had been a busy time of ministry for Jesus. News of Him had gone far and wide. So that now, we read here in verse 40 that a leper came seeking Him.

His affliction

Leprosy was one of the most feared diseases in the world during Biblical times. Once you had been diagnosed with leprosy in ancient Israel, you suffered the worst of all possible kinds of isolation. And I’m not talking about a quarantine that would last a week or two like back during Covid, but a quarantine for the rest of your life. If you had leprosy, unless you were cured of that leprosy by some miraculous means, you were sentenced to a solitary life removed from the community. You were removed from your family, and you were separated from all the religious institutions of the day. You were a social pariah. And so in the first century world, there was no disease regarded with more fear or disgust than

that of leprosy. Anyone identified as a leper was reduced to a pitiful state of existence both physically and spiritually.

You may have heard of Paul Brand. His parents were medical missionaries, and he spent most of his childhood in India where he was exposed to people with leprosy at a very young age. He told of an incident that happened when he was seven years old when three men limped into his family's medical compound. As they approached, he noticed their physical appearance was deformed. They were bandaged. They lacked fingers, and one man's legs ended in round stumps where there used to be two feet. The three men fell to the ground before Paul's father, the missionary doctor. When previous patients had done that, the doctor would always lift them to their feet. But not this time, his dad didn't reach out to the men, he didn't touch them, he didn't approach them closely. He told them that there was not much he could do, but he would give them what he could. From the medical dispensary, he returned with fresh cloths and bandages while wearing surgical gloves. He applied some medicine wrapped them in the fresh bandages. Paul's mother approached with a basket of fruit which she set on the ground before the men, telling them to take it. The men took the fruit, but left the basket as they hobbled off out of sight. When little Paul went to pick up the basket, his mother cried out, "No Paul! Don't touch it! And don't go near the place where they sat." His father, while still wearing his surgical gloves, picked up the basket and put it in a fire to be burned. He took off his gloves, threw them in to the fire, and scrubbed his hands with soap and hot water. Paul's mother then bathed him and his sister even though they didn't come into contact with the men. And Paul Brand would later write of these experiences in his book, *"Fearfully and Wonderfully Made,"* which he co-authored with Phillip Yancey. He said:

“That incident was my first exposure to leprosy, the oldest recorded disease and one of the most dreaded.”

Paul Brand went on to become a world-renowned surgeon and pioneer in treating Hansen’s Disease, the modern term that refers to what has historically been known as leprosy.

You don’t have to turn there, but Leviticus 13-14 provides insight as to how leprosy was managed in Old Testament Israel. The law of Moses laid out certain specifications for those who had contracted the disease. For instance, it mentions a variety of scenarios in which lepers were to be examined by the priests and forced to live in a separate place of quarantine from the rest of the camp of Israel. The law demanded:

Leviticus 13:45—“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.”

Now, just imagine if you had leprosy, and think about what it would be like. Everywhere you went that was a public place, where there were other people, you’d be shouting “Unclean! Unclean!” Going to the store, down to the park, the sense of worthlessness, despair, knowing that others looked down on and despise you. Of course, we know that by the time of Jesus, the rabbis had added a great deal of other rules to God’s law. The rabbinical teaching of Jesus’ day had absurd rules regarding the leper. And that made it even worse, as if it wasn’t bad enough for these poor souls. The rabbis said that if a leper even stuck his head inside a house, it was to be pronounced unclean. It was illegal for

a clean person to even greet a leper. Lepers had to remain 150 feet away from other people if the wind was blowing in their direction, and 6 feet away if it was blowing away from them. Josephus, the Jewish historian, summed up their condition by saying that lepers were treated as if they were in effect dead men.

Alfred Edersheim — *“As the leper passed by, his clothes torn, his hair disheveled and the lower part of his face and upper lip covered, it was as one going to death who read his own burial service. The mournful words, ‘Unclean, Unclean,’ which he uttered, proclaimed that his was both living and moral death.”*

And so lepers were ostracized, forced to live in isolation from everyone else in the covenant community. It wasn't an act of cruelty, but it was a way of isolating those who might be carrying an infectious disease of any sort so as to not spread it unnecessarily to others. And so you can see why a social stigma was attached to those with leprosy. As those ostracized from society, lepers would find each other and congregate together in shared misery. They were not only physically unclean, but they were also ceremonially unclean and kept away from corporate worship. All of that is helpful in understanding where this man in Mark 1 was coming from. Such was his experience.

In many ways, leprosy was a graphic picture of sin.

J.C. Ryle — *“It is a radical disease of the whole man. Just like sin, it attacks not merely the skin, but the blood, the flesh and bones, until the unhappy patient begins to lose its extremities, and to rot by inches.”*

Again we read in Leviticus 13 that, like sin, leprosy goes deeper than the surface. Leprosy spreads, and so does sin. Leprosy defiles and isolates a person just like sin does. It cuts us off from others, and in a spiritual sense it makes us unclean and impure. There are instructions about how things worn and touched by a

leper were fit for the fire, to be burned and destroyed. Friends, that's what sin does to us. It makes us deserving of God's judgment. So that the person who has never trusted in Christ is in a worse spiritual state than this man was in physically. If you are without Christ, you are a dead man walking. And there is nothing that you can do to save yourself.

His approach

Before we see the actual words he speaks, I want you to notice the man's attitude. He comes to Jesus with humility, and with a sense of brokenness. Mark says that he came to Jesus imploring Him and kneeling down before Him. He wasn't coming to demand that he should be cleansed and healed. He wasn't coming presuming anything. This man knew he was a leper, and he couldn't hide the fact that he was a leper. So he was able to freely admit what he was, and not only that, but pay attention that he recognized who Jesus was. He comes to the One who has authority over the disease! And then notice:

His appeal

The man says, "If You will, You can make me clean!" Isn't that a wonderful statement? His faith is revealed by the fact that he doesn't question Jesus' ability to save him, only His willingness. He recognizes that Jesus is able, but he is not sure that He is willing. The man understands the depth of his own need. He knows that the Lord is able, but is He willing? And that is the question. Because his salvation is dependent upon both. Let's look at Psalm 51 for just a minute...

Psalm 51:17 speaks of a broken spirit, contrite heart. This is the attitude of the leper. There are no demands. There is no bargaining. There is only humility and surrender. In other words, what God desires is not outward performance, but inward humility. It is a heart that is crushed over sin, emptied of self-reliance,

and fully dependent upon His mercy. The man comes to Jesus with no demands, but with desperation. He does not assert his worth, but acknowledges his need. So much so that he falls on his knees and says, “If You will, You can make me clean,” revealing both his helplessness and his confidence in Christ’s power. It is a picture of a man with a truly broken and contrite heart, someone who knows he is unclean, who knows he cannot fix himself, and who casts himself entirely upon the mercy of Jesus. And just as Psalm 51 promises, the Lord does not despise such a heart. He responds with mercy, touching the untouchable, and says, “I will; be clean.” The leper’s cleansing becomes a living picture that God receives and restores those who come to Him in humble, broken repentance.

2—The tender COMPASSION the man experienced (1:41)

“Moved with pity, He stretched out His hand and touched him and said to him, ‘I will; be clean.’”

Picture this scene in your mind. The leper goes against all social conventions and takes a chance in approaching the Lord Jesus. Will he be shunned and rejected? Will he be kept at a distance from the only One who can do anything about his dire situation? Watch what happens. Surprisingly, the response of Jesus to this leper is no less scandalous than the leper’s own audacity. Rather than turning from the leper, Jesus turns to him. And instead of recoiling from the leper in disgust, Mark says that Jesus was moved with pity.

Literally, verse 41 tells us that Jesus was ‘moved deep on the inside.’ It means He experienced intense compassion for the leper’s suffering. He is moved with compassion because of the predicament of this leprous man, and it prompted Him to do what no one did—He stretched out His hand and touched him, even before the man was cleansed. Now, that’s very significant, because no less than

eight times in Mark it is recorded that Jesus ‘touched’ those who had great needs. We’ve already seen one of those, for when He healed Peter’s mother-in-law, verse 31 says He took her by the hand and lifted her up. And now we see how He touches the leper in verse 41. Later in chapter 5, when He heals Jairus’ daughter, we read that He took her by the hand and says, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” Then in Mark 6, Jesus enters His home town of Nazareth, and it says He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And in chapter 7, Jesus encounters a deaf man and verse 33 says He touched his ears in order to heal him. On and on it goes.

Now, let me say that in all of these instances where Jesus touched someone in order to heal them, there was no need of Jesus to touch any of them. He didn’t need to do it that way. In fact, we know there were other times that Jesus had only to speak a word and people were healed or delivered. And so it wasn’t a necessity that He touched these people in order to make them whole. His word is enough. But the reason He touched people physically was simply because He wanted to show that He cared beyond words. It was an act of compassion. And I don’t think you will find anything else in all of the Bible that more graphically communicates the fact that His love extends beyond words than what He does to heal this man of leprosy.

This very well could have been the first touch the man had felt in years. Can you imagine what the crowd must have thought? I imagine you could have heard an audible gasp as the man approaches the Lord, who then does the unimaginable by reaching out His hand and touching him. When others had ran from him, the Lord runs to him. When others had rejected him, the Lord embraces him. And so Mark tells us about the terrible condition the man faced, as well as the tender compassion the man experienced. And what’s more is that we’re told about:

3—The total CLEANSING the man received (1:42-45)

“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.”

Here you have a man who very much has death on his mind, living under the sentence of death, and Jesus has compassion on him. He has come to seek and save the lost. That was the reason He came into the world. He is a merciful, compassionate Savior. There is no one beyond the reach of His compassion, and that includes the leper. And notice that compassion results in cleansing.

Luke 5:12 describes him as a ‘man’ full of leprosy. He uses the word ‘aner’ which a masculine noun. It is Luke’s way of acknowledging his humanity. And that is important. It is easy for us to say, “Here is a leper.” It is something else to say, “Here is a man, here is a son of Adam, someone who has been made in the image of God, who is debilitated by this dreadful disease.” It is a picture of what sin does to us. Sin dehumanizes us by distorting the very image of God in which we were created, reducing us from what we were meant to be. The Bible says that humanity bears God’s likeness—capable of righteousness, relationship, and reflection of His character—but sin corrupts those capacities. And now, instead of ruling over creation with wisdom, we become enslaved to disordered desires. Instead of loving others, we turn inward in selfishness. Instead of living in truth, we embrace deception. So that in this way, sin does not elevate human freedom but actually diminishes it, binding the will and darkening the mind. It fractures our

relationship with God, alienates us from others, and even disrupts our inner wholeness, leaving us restless and empty on the inside. Like this leper in Mark 1, who was physically and socially cut off, sin isolates and degrades us, stripping away our dignity and fellowship with God. Ultimately, sin makes us less like God and less like what we were originally created to be until that image is restored through redemption in Christ.

Here is this man, who comes to Jesus and says, “If You will, You can make me clean.” And Jesus heals the man, so that we read in verse 42, “And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.” His cleansing was instant and immediate. Jesus restores to him the dignity of his God-given humanity. I can see it now, the fingers which had been drawn up, the flesh that had been devoured and marred by the disease was suddenly smooth as a baby’s. It was a redemptive miracle so that the man was made completely new. That’s what God does for us in Christ!

2 Corinthians 5:17—“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Verse 43 says that Jesus ‘sternly charged’ him and sent him away, telling him to say nothing to anyone, but to go and present himself to the priest and offer for his cleansing what Moses commanded for a proof to them. The Law of Moses said that this was necessary for re-entry into the covenant community. And the miracle would have been a powerful testimony to the priests as to the identity of Jesus.

Jesus cleansed the man, then he commanded the man. It is a picture of discipleship. Before He commands us, He cleanses us. Before there is a Christian life, there must be a new birth. Justification first, then sanctification

follows. I should point out the fact that the man does what Jesus tells him not to do. Verse 45 says, "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."

Now, we can certainly understand how his enthusiasm gets the best of him. I mean, he has just been miraculously cleansed from leprosy. There is a sense in which he can't help but share the news. But it is important to share that news the way that Jesus tells him. His testimony makes it harder for Jesus to enter town without getting mobbed by the masses of people seeking their own miracle.

Jesus healed the leper. So what? How does this apply to my life? Two thoughts before I close:

- **Our need for cleansing is just as crucial as the leper's**

I wonder if you have ever experienced a consciousness of your sin like this man had about his leprosy? Maybe it has affected you physically, maybe your sin has taken out a toll on you mentally and emotionally. It's affecting you in your personality. It's affecting the people that you live with, and ultimately it is affecting your relationship to God. Well, that is just like leprosy. Sin is actually worse.

- **Our response to Jesus is just as crucial as the leper's**

If You will, You can. That's the outlook of faith. Faith does not make demands. Faith does not try to bargain. Faith is trusting Jesus completely. Salvation is a gift that you and I receive. It is given in grace and received through faith. Listen to what one person has said of this story:

James Edwards — *“Mark begins 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.”*

Friends, we are the spiritual lepers who lived in alienation and isolation from God. We met Him, we were brought into the presence of God. 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. The Bible says:

2 Corinthians 5:21 — **“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

Because Jesus was forsaken, because Jesus was treated as an outcast, you and I are accepted and welcomed into the presence of God. And so here in this one miracle, Mark gives us a picture of what Jesus has come to do. He is the healer of hurts. He is the One who saves. He is the Reconciler and Restorer of all that the enemy has stolen. Jesus didn’t simply heal the leper—He cleansed him. He removed not only the disease, but the defilement. He made the unclean clean and restored him to God. And that’s what He will do for the sinner who comes to Him in faith. Because there is no condition worse than being alienated from God.

Sin will only separate and destroy. But Jesus came to die in your place. That’s the gospel! So that now you must come to Jesus in your helpless condition. And the good news of the gospel is that Jesus is a Savior who is full of compassion.

That is why we can now come to the Lord’s Table. We do not come as those who have made ourselves clean, but as those who were once unclean and have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. The hymn writer said, “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! What can make me whole

again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!” The bread reminds us of His body given for us, and the cup reminds us that His blood was shed for the forgiveness of our sins. As 1 John 1:7 says, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. We don’t come wondering if He is willing—we remember that He has already made a way. We come as those who can say with confidence that we were unclean, but through the finished work of Jesus Christ, we have been cleansed and made whole! Let’s pray.