

Mark 1:40-45
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"Today's Lepers"

In the New Testament, there is no disease regarded with more terror and pity than leprosy. Although virtually obliterated in industrialized nations today, cases of leprosy continue to be reported in third world countries. As you probably know, the disease is a skin disorder. Ulcerated whelps form on the skin that can also affect the muscular and nervous systems. Mental decay is assured while the end result is usually fatal; it is also contagious.

The pain from this dreaded disease is excruciating. I don't know about you but when I am sick, I like to be pampered. If I'm not feeling well, I find comfort in the fact that someone can and does take care of me. Lepers did not enjoy this luxury. The source of their solace was people in the same boat disregarding their own suffering in trying to grant sometimes unreachable serenity.

In New Testament times, lepers were removed from the cities and placed in colonies outside the city walls. This practice had its founding in Scripture. Leviticus 13:45-46 reads, "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his moustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." So they were sentenced to wear ripped and ragged clothing, to shave their heads, to always have a moustache, and to cry "Unclean!" so that others would be alerted. Lepers were also made to wear a bell around their neck to caution people of their infectious presence.

Besides the physical trauma, the emotional distress was unreal. Picture what it was like to see someone in this condition: their tattered clothes hanging on their emaciated bodies; their skin covered with sores; and their eyes filled with doom. Now try to imagine how the leper must have felt. Because we have not been infected with the disease and we do not live in first century Palestine, we cannot fully *feel* their pain. We can only imagine their horrible physical pain that *never* ceased. The agony of loneliness was faced daily; these lepers were separated from family, from home and even from church. Imagine what it would be like to be reminded of your impending fate everytime that you had to cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" Try to picture a scenario of women and children fleeing in terror upon hearing your bell and your faint voice again crying "Unclean!" This daily calamity was the life of a leper.

There was also another stigma placed on the leper. Many believed that the disease was an emblem of sin. Because of its hideous symptoms, its rotting sores, its slow, steady progress, its defiance of any type of cure, many thought that sin *had* to be the root problem, and that the disease was their judgment.

Jesus was well aware of the condition of those with leprosy. Our Scripture speaks of a leper who probably had suffered his limit. For a leper to *get* to Jesus, he either had to take off his bell or not cry out "Unclean." We do not know if either was the case. The Law prohibited lepers from just walking up to people because of their contagious condition. This probably indicates that the leper in question was a *desperate* man. He took a chance of receiving further punishment by approaching someone other than a leper. He not only approached Jesus, he begged on his hands and knees; he groveled. He did not doubt Jesus' ability to *heal* him; although he may have doubted whether Jesus or anyone else *cared*. Given the man's past, he most likely did not have a good track record in receiving attention from *non*-lepers. Notice he says "If you want, you can heal me." Although this account was early in Jesus' ministry, Jesus had already healed many who were ill with diseases as found in verse 35.

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Maybe the leper had a hunch based on these other healings of which he had heard. These other incidents had given him a hope that even *he* could be whole, and this hope had given him the courage to break the Law and approach Jesus.

Our passage says that Jesus was *moved* with compassion. The hopeless state of the leper coupled with the fact that he believed Jesus could heal him was enough to create the emotion of compassion in the one who had unconditional love for *all* people. Jesus then did the unthinkable: he *touched* him.

I can imagine the disciples and others who were watching. You know that they had probably already stepped *away* for fear of catching this dreaded disease. They had never seen anyone even *talk* to a leper, much less *touch* one. But you know that's the way they were taught. They had been trained to do certain things as children, and they were just living out their raising.

I think that too often, people *hide* behind their raising. Statements like, "That's just the way that it's done where I'm from," or "You know, old habits are hard to break" are prime examples of some people refusing to accept change. If your "raising" is contradictory to the gospel that says Jesus came for *all* people, then we are called to leave our "raising" and cleave to what the gospel teaches.

So Jesus *touched* the leper; this was probably the first touch from a non-leper that he had ever had. Because he was an outcast, he could not be embraced or even touched by just anyone. Yet Jesus once again broke down another barrier and *touched* him. To Jesus, the man was *not* unclean, although that word had fallen off the leper's lips countless times. Instead, to Jesus, the man was an individual in dire need.

By *touching* the leper, Jesus also *identified* with him. At this point the Son of God, fully divine, showed his humanity by offering the human touch. He showed everyone who was watching the importance of human contact.

Jesus then answered him by saying, "I do want you to be whole; be healed." Jesus granted cleansing to the one who had proclaimed himself unclean so many times. And immediately, the leprosy was gone.

The story continues with Jesus directing the man to follow the ritual set up for lepers. He was to go to the priest for a complicated ceremony of restoration back into the community. This was also a part of the Mosaic Law found in Leviticus. This miracle helped set the stage for the remainder of Jesus' ministry.

So now we know what to do when we encounter a person with leprosy. But chances are very great that most of us will never have that opportunity. So who are today's lepers? I contend to you this morning that those in our society who are treated as lepers are those with the horrible disease we know as AIDS.

Let's look at some parallels. I will re-state some earlier quotes about leprosy using AIDS instead. In today's society, there is no disease regarded with more terror and pity than AIDS. Besides the physical trauma, the emotional distress is unreal. Try to imagine how the person with AIDS must feel. Because we have not been infected with the disease, we cannot fully feel their pain. For some, the agony of their loneliness is faced daily; many individuals with AIDS have been separated from family, from home, and even from church.

As with the lepers, try to picture a scenario of parents and children fleeing in terror upon hearing that a child in their day-care or school has the HIV virus. It happens all the time. The rationale from the parents is that their child may even catch the disease. But in reality, physicians and researchers tell us that the only way that anyone can contract the disease is through the exchange of bodily fluids. AIDS cannot be transmitted through a hand-shake or any other form of casual contact.

Also, many look at AIDS as an emblem of sin, just as people in biblical times viewed leprosy. I have even heard a pastor publicly state that AIDS is God's judgment on America for their acceptance of homosexuality. I think that both statements are false. First, not everyone who has AIDS contracted it because of homosexuality; blood transfusions dispel that rationale, and heterosexuals contract the disease just as easily as homosexuals. Secondly, AIDS is not only in America. Sub-Saharan Africa is more heavily affected by HIV and AIDS than any other region [aids.htm](#) of the world. An estimated 22 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2007, and approximately 1.9 million additional people were infected with HIV during last year. In 2008, the AIDS epidemic in Africa claimed the lives of an estimated 1.5 million people in this region. More than eleven million children have been orphaned by AIDS.

(<http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/HIVData/GlobalReport/2008/>)

I fully understand that some people with AIDS have contracted the virus through reckless living. But I also know of a story where a lady was caught in the act of adultery and thrown at the feet of Jesus. The accusers said, "Moses' Law says that we should stone this woman. What do you say?" While scribbling in the dirt, Jesus responded by saying, "Whichever one of you has no sin can throw the first stone." Today, when people make statements such as "Those with AIDS deserve their fate because the disease is a consequence of their behavior," I wonder if they would be worthy to throw the first stone because of a sinless life. Despite the past or present behavior of someone with AIDS, the individual is actually no different from you or me. Scripture says that "We all have sinned and fallen short of God's intention." No one is able to sit in the seat of judgment except Christ himself.

Basically what I am saying is that people with AIDS deserve the same love and affection that Jesus gave the leper. A few years ago, some friends of ours who were in their late 70s, volunteered with an organization called Open Hands; they provided meals on wheels to people with AIDS. One of the friends was a retired ordained Baptist minister, and he told me how that he had shared communion with some of those infected with HIV. These individuals feared that they would never get another chance to have communion, because they dreaded going to church.

Today many people with AIDS will not enter the doors of a church because of the rejection that they have already experienced by those who call themselves Christian. Some choose to call themselves Christ-like yet respond according to "their raising" or out of fear rather than out of compassion. Jesus was moved by compassion upon hearing the request of the leper for healing. Today we may not be able to offer physical healing to those who are HIV positive, but we can respond as Jesus did with a touch. That touch could be physical, such as an embrace, or the touch could be intangible by showing acceptance and affirmation to some who may feel lonely. Whatever the case, we should follow Jesus' example.

My guess is that there are some in our congregation who have never met someone with AIDS. You may never have that opportunity, but with the rising infection rate, chances are great that we will all encounter AIDS through a family member, friend or acquaintance. And one day, AIDS will come to church . . . our church . . . every church. And when faced with that opportunity, what will you do? Will you lend a hand, or will you cast a stone?

Even today, the Spirit of Christ wants to live through those who believe in him touching lepers everywhere. While people with AIDS could be called "today's lepers," many people in our society are equally ostracized. What will be your response to today's lepers?