

Mark 1:40-45

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Have you heard the one about the Lord, the leper, and the Levite?

Well, if there were such a joke, it would be a very sick joke, for leprosy is no laughing matter. But our passage this morning, the one we've read, the few verses that we've read there at the end of Mark's Gospel, does introduce us to three characters that I want us to think about in the context of what we read.

One already familiar to us, and I trust increasingly familiar, the Lord. The man approached Jesus, and in Matthew's account, we're told that he addressed him in this way, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

The character we want to spend time thinking about. But then, of course, the man himself, the leper. We read of him. We don't know his name, but we are introduced to him, and we discover something about him, even in the approach that he makes and in the manner that he is described. And we want to think a little bit about him also. But then there's a third character, much more in the background, a bit player really in the account. But there's the priest to whom the man is sent.

[1 : 26] We're calling him the Levite. The only reason we're calling him a Levite is that it allows us to have the Lord, the leper, and the Levite. But he would have been a Levite. But he was a priest, and we read of him also.

We want to think about him, though, as I say, the part he plays seems a very minor one. And yet, there is, I think, from him a lesson and a warning. So the leper, the Lord, and the Levite, that's the order in which we'll consider these characters.

It's the order in which we are introduced to them. Let's think, first of all, about the leper. However, we're not told much about him. He's not given a name.

I'm sure he had a name, but we're not given his name. Perhaps even that is a reflection of his sorry plight, simply known as a leper.

That's who he was. That's what identified him. More than his background or his family or his name, he was simply a leper. And as we think about this man, there are maybe two words that can help us give some thought to him in the light of what we're told.

[2 : 39] And we can think about his plight, and we can think about his plea. For both are there to be found in our passage, his plight and his plea. Let's begin with his plight.

The language that Mark employs, it almost seems a matter of fact. The man with leprosy came to him. Mark is always in such a hurry to present the material to us.

He doesn't dwell on too many details. He wants to get to the core of the matter. And he simply, in this very matter of fact way, presents it to us. A man with leprosy came to Jesus.

And the language perhaps can lend to us missing the horror of his plight. Leprosy wasn't just an illness.

It wasn't just a sickness. It was a sentence. It was a life sentence for those so afflicted. Now, the word itself, the word leprosy that we find there in verse 40, is a word that could be used to identify any number of skin conditions.

[3 : 51] And sometimes it's not clear what particular condition is being considered or being identified. But I think on this occasion, it would seem reasonable to conclude that it is referring to the condition that we would now know as or identify as leprosy.

It was an incurable and contagious disease that brought untold suffering to those unfortunate enough to be afflicted. We have parallel passages concerning this miracle in Matthew's gospel and in Luke's gospel.

And Luke uses more vivid language. And he describes the man there in chapter 5 and verse 12. He describes the man, this same man, as covered with leprosy.

Or one way that the language of Luke could be translated is that he was full of leprosy. And that language certainly is very vivid. This poor man, this is his plight. He was full of leprosy. But of even greater consequence than the sickness was the sentence that accompanied this ill.

[5 : 10] The sickness robbed a man, it robbed this man of his health. The sentence robbed the sufferer of his family, of his home, of his occupation, of his place in the community, and perhaps even of his name.

The leper was ostracized and required to make his appearance as repugnant as possible. If it wasn't repugnant enough, perhaps at the early stages of the disease, it would not have been. And so he had to make a conscious effort to make himself repugnant that he would warn off those who were clean, that they might not be infected by him.

If others did come close to him, he was required to cry out, unclean, unclean. We can read of the regulations in the Mosaic law that were applied in some measure even at the time of Jesus. In Leviticus chapters 13 and 14, we won't do that now. Josephus, a Jewish historian, contemporary of Jesus at the time of Jesus, described the banishment of lepers as in no way differing from a corpse.

[6 : 33] And some rabbis from the time are recorded as describing lepers as the living dead. It's horrific language, but it captures really their plight, the living dead.

They were still breathing, still living, their organs were still functioning, but they were in many ways to all intents and purposes, the living dead. Other illnesses could be healed, or indeed if there was a prospect, that is what was required, that they be healed.

But leprosy had to be cleansed. It carried, though it was a physical ailment, it carried more in terms of its implications and symbolism. Indeed, in our passage, there are multiple references to cleansing.

This is what the man asks. You can make me clean. He doesn't say you can heal me, you can make me clean. And indeed, those are the words of Jesus to the leper, be a clean.

Can you begin to imagine that man's plight? Can you imagine the day that he discovered his death sentence?

[7 : 49] The day when he first discovered that he was suffering from this disease? Can you imagine the thoughts that would have invaded his mind and his heart and his whole being?

The horror of the discovery. Can you imagine him having to tell his wife and his children and prepare his things to leave the home and go out into lonely places?

Can you imagine that journey for this poor man? Can you imagine the interminable days and weeks and months, maybe years that had passed suffering from this condition?

Can you imagine his longing, his longing for companionship and love and acceptance, a longing that he knew would never be fulfilled?

Can you imagine perhaps his sense of profound injustice? Why me? Why am I suffering so? What have I done?

[8 : 47] Why me? Why me?

Why me?

Why me?

You can make me clean. This was a desperate plea. There's a reason for calling it a desperate plea because he was desperate.

I wonder if he confided in anybody concerning his intentions to approach this man Jesus. And had he confided in anybody concerning his madness. Did those he confide in pity his madness?

[10 : 47] What you are contemplating, it's madness. It's madness. Did they try and dissuade him from awakening hopes that could only be dashed?

Why would you do such a thing? Why would you do such a thing? There's no hope for you. Perhaps fellow lepers, there's no hope for us. I wonder if he said to others, come with me.

And they said, no. We know. We know that there is no hope for us. If you want to embark on this act of lunacy, well, go ahead.

But we will have nothing of it. It was desperate not only in the sense of it coming from a desperate man, but in the sense that the very approach was an act of scandalous rebellion.

He had no right to approach any clean man in the way that he did. Matthew's account, we find that in the eighth chapter of Matthew's gospel, suggests that there were crowds following Jesus.

[11 : 49] In Luke's account, it's not clear if others were there. But Matthew certainly gives the impression that there were others there. And what would this man's approach to Jesus have produced in the crowds that were following him?

Well, we can be sure that it would have provoked in them a real sense of horror and outrage. Who is this man? What is he doing? It was a desperate plea.

But together with his desperation, there is this aspect of his plea that demonstrates humility and reverence. He came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.

But perhaps what is most impressive of his plea in the sense of causing an impression, and difficult really even to describe and to come to a conclusion about is what I'm calling the uncertainty of his plea.

If you are willing, you can make me clean. The man did not doubt the power of Jesus to cleanse. That in itself, we could say, is commendable, his faith in the power of Jesus to make him clean.

[13 : 12] I know you can make me clean. On that point, there is no doubt in his mind. If you are willing, you can make me clean. But he does seem to doubt or harbor some doubts or confusion or uncertainty concerning the willingness of Jesus to do so.

If you are willing, you can make me clean. What about you?

Are you desperate or despairing? Cry out to Jesus. But I don't know if he'll answer me. I don't know if he cares.

I don't know if he's willing. Maybe you don't even know if he's able. Unlike this man. Cry out to him. Get on your knees and cry out.

What have you got to lose? There's one thing we can say about this man. He didn't have anything to lose. And if anybody did try and dissuade him from this enterprise, perhaps that was his response.

[14 : 20] Or perhaps that was his attitude. What have I got to lose? I have nothing to lose. And so I will go and I will beg and I will cry out and people can say what they wish to say.

I have nothing to lose. Now your problem. My problem. Our problem. Your problem may not be physical.

Your problem may be spiritual. You're conscious. Your sin and guilt. Perhaps for the first time. Perhaps a growing awareness of something that you've been able to keep covered.

And very much in the back of your mind. It needs dealt with. It needs to be forgiven. It needs to be cleansed.

But will Jesus be willing? Is he able? Cry out. Find out for yourself. The leper.

[15 : 23] Then we have another character. The main character in many ways of the account. And that is the Lord. Jesus. I want to think about how Jesus responds to this man's plea.

And we can think about how Jesus responds with the help of two words. Jesus' heart. And Jesus' hand. What can we say of Jesus' heart from what we're told here in the passage?

Well, we focus our attention on the first words of verse 41. We're told, Filled with compassion. Jesus reached out his hand.

Filled with compassion. And the language here that Mark uses, I'm struck by the contrast in the language that Mark uses with Luke's description of this man as full of leprosy.

Remember, we noted that a moment ago, that Luke describes the man as full of leprosy. Well, for a man full of leprosy, who better than the Lord full of compassion?

[16 : 29] You can see the wonderful symmetry of grace. Full of leprosy. Full of pain. Full of shame. Full of hurt. Full of despair.

But then Jesus, full of compassion. Just ponder on that contrast that is painted between this man's plight and the heart of the one that he makes his plea to.

Filled with compassion. Now, the language that Mark uses here that's translated for us as filled with compassion. We've just given some thought to.

There is considerable debate as to whether the word that Mark uses is compassion or anger. You might say, well, they seem so different, these words.

But, of course, in many ways, they're not as different as they seem in the sense of the emotional intensity attached to these two words. And a good case can be made to come to the conclusion that Mark actually speaks of Jesus as being filled with anger.

[17 : 41] And we say, well, that's odd. How are we to understand that? If indeed that is what Mark has said. Is he angry with the man? Is he angry with the man for his temerity in approaching him, being a leper?

Well, his consequent actions would, I think, discard that possibility. Rather, we can believe and conclude that Jesus was filled with anger at the disease that the man was suffering from.

He was angered by the tangible and awful evidence of the ravages of sin and the fall. Sin and its consequences angers Jesus.

It angers God. And that is true regardless of what we conclude regarding the actual vocabulary that Mark uses here to describe Jesus. And we need a God who is both full of compassion and full of anger.

Now, why do I say that? I was struck by something that Pope Francis said just this week. I think it was on Friday in his weekly homily.

[18 : 57] And he was, of course, making reference to the massacres in Paris and elsewhere. And Pope Francis described something of what we have all witnessed in these days.

And after a pregnant pause, a consummate communicator that he is, he then declared, And God weeps.

And God weeps. And the picture that he paints, and it's a very vivid picture, and it's a very dramatic picture, and it's a picture that we're drawn to in some sense, the picture that he paints is of a God full of compassion.

But I fear little else. You see, I can weep, but I can't heal. I can weep, but I can't bring back the dead.

I can weep, but I can't bring justice for those who have been oppressed. Weeping is good, but weeping is not enough.

[19 : 56] Not if we're talking about God. God is full of compassion. He weeps if you wish. But he is also full of righteous anger, an anger that will find expression in dealing with both the cause and the perpetrators of evil.

Jesus came to deal with the cause of evil, and he dealt with the cause of evil on the cross. As he died for sinners and took upon himself the curse of sin and the punishment for sin.

And when he returns, for return he will, he will then ultimately and definitively deal with the perpetrators of evil, those who refuse to repent of their evil.

It's not that he's not dealing in any way with them even now, but there is a day coming when there will be that ultimate day of reckoning, and justice will be served.

His heart, but we also spoke of his hand. What does Jesus do with his hand? Well, if we can describe the leper's approach as scandalous, and we can, then we are scrambling for words to describe the response of Jesus.

[21 : 14] Altogether more scandalous on another level of scandal. He touches him. He reached out his hand, and he touched the man.

He touched the leopard. He touched the unclean thing. You can almost hear the gasps of horror, and the disapproving whispers rippling through the crowds as Jesus touches the man.

He touched him. Did you see that? He touched him. Can it be? He touched him. You see, this was wrong at so many levels. At the most basic level, he was exposing himself to infection.

But even more seriously, he was acting in direct contravention of the Mosaic law concerning this condition. Of course, that Jesus would do this gives us a clue as to his identity and consequent authority.

How could he so brazenly, it would seem, disregard the law? Maybe I can try and illustrate why it is that Jesus could do so by means of a scene that I'm going to paint for you.

[22 : 30] You're in your car. You're approaching a junction. And you can see that there's been an accident. And there are traffic lights.

And the traffic light is at red. But then you see that there's a policeman. He's obviously there in connection with the accident. And the policeman is waving you through. But you see, the traffic light is at red.

But the policeman is waving you through. And what do you do? What do you do? You know what you do. You go through. You don't say, I know it's a red light. I can't go through. No, the policeman is waving you through.

You see, the policeman there, in a sense, embodies the law. He has the authority, the delegated authority, to determine what should be done in those circumstances. And so if he waves you through, well, you go through.

Now, this doesn't do complete justice to what I'm trying to say. But there's a sense in which Jesus here is the one who embodies the law, who has authority over the law.

[23 : 26] And that authority is exercised on this occasion as he touches the man. But the touch speaks not only of his authority over the law, it speaks also, of course, of his love and compassion for the despised and the hopeless and the unclean.

This hand that touches the leper. Of course, it's not just a touch. You see, the hand, the touch was accompanied with words.

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean. Can you just try and visualize what is happening and what verse 42 declares?

Immediately, the leprosy left him and he was cured. Just in your mind's eye, imagine that scene.

This is a man covered with leprosy.

This is a man full of leprosy. And yet when Jesus touches him and declares him clean, immediately the leprosy left him.

[24 : 45] He was cured. He was clean. Just the visual impact. Imagine that you were a witness there watching this happen. What drama to see this.

It would stay with you the rest of your days. You saw that day when you saw that man being touched by Jesus and being cleansed by Jesus.

You see, if this is true, you've got to deal with this man. You've got to deal with this man, Jesus. If what we read is true, you can't simply pass it by and say, well, that's a nice story.

But there is something even more remarkable about this touch. You see, the compassion and power of Jesus turns conventional wisdom and religion on its head.

Jesus ought to have been contaminated by the man. That's what conventional wisdom and conventional religion had established. If you touch a leper, you will be contaminated.

[25 : 50] That's what happens. That's the way it is. But wonder of wonders. It's the other way around. It is the man who is cleansed by Jesus.

One commentator described the encounter. You might even call it the transaction in this way. The leper is cleansed by Jesus' contagious holiness.

Isn't that a beautiful phrase? Jesus' contagious holiness. I call it a transaction. It's maybe not the best language to use.

But the reason I use that language is because there is a sense in which Jesus, driven by love, trades places with the man. Even as we read the account, the man was condemned by his leprosy to lonely places, to be set apart from human society.

That was his place as a leper, the lonely places. But the man is brought back into the fold. And Jesus, by contrast, and as a direct result of his restoring encounter with the man, is banished to the lonely places.

[27 : 13] We read there in verse 45 that as a consequence of this healing, he stayed outside in lonely places. Now, we know the reason for that. But there is a certain drama in that turn of events, as it were.

What happens to the man and what happens to Jesus? What about you? Do you stand in need of the touch of Jesus? He is willing and he is able.

Though leprosy was a physical condition, it did also symbolize the plague and the plight of sin.

That's not to say that the sufferers were in any way more sinful than those who did not suffer.

Not at all. And what Jesus did for that man's leprosy, he can do for your sin. He is able to cleanse and forgive and restore. And he is willing to cleanse and forgive and restore.

Some three years after this encounter with the leper, Jesus would head out of another town. And he would head to the ultimate lonely place at Golgotha, at Calvary, where he would die in the place of sinners.

[28 : 31] That lonely place where he died for us. If you come to him with your plea, he will say to you, I am willing. Be clean.

The leper, the Lord, and more briefly, the Levite. Now as we read the account, and as it would perhaps more commonly be considered, we would now want to focus a little on the Lord's instructions to the man, and even more so the man's response and disobedience to the instructions

that he has given.

But we're not going to do that. We're rather going to just spend a little time thinking about this third character in the drama. The priest that is made reference to, really in quite a fleeting way in verse 44, in the context of the instructions that Jesus gives to the leper.

He says, It does seem a little underwhelming to move from the Lord to the Levite, but bear with me because I think the Levite has an important lesson and warning for us.

So we can think of the priest's task, but also his testimony or the testimony that is spoken of. His task is clear enough. He was tasked with confirming and certifying the man's healing.

[30 : 04] We might even ponder, well, why was this task even contemplated if we're saying that leprosy was incurable? Well, of course, the function related to any number of skin diseases that came under that umbrella term of leprosy, some of which were curable.

And the priest here was performing what we might call a public health function, just to establish and to determine if indeed somebody was cured of whatever skin ailment or disease they had been suffering from.

Now, in the account, we're not told that the man did what he was told in this regard. But I think we can conclude that he most probably did. He wouldn't have been able to do the other things that he did had he not followed this part of Jesus' instruction, certainly going to the priest.

For that, he wouldn't have had to go to Jerusalem. The sacrifices that are mentioned probably would have involved him having to go to Jerusalem, but the first step of going to a priest he could have done in Galilee. A local priest could have served the function, and no doubt the man did what he was told to do in this regard.

So the priest fulfilled his task. We don't need to go into further details about that. What more interests me is this testimony that is spoken of in verse 44.

[31 : 18] The man is told to go to the priest to do what he has to do as a testimony to them. What does that mean? Is this simply a testimony to the fact that the man was now healed or clean?

That's proof to them that he had been healed of his leprosy. Well, yes. But I think there's more here. The phrase that we are focusing on can also be translated as a testimony against them.

Prepositions are always complicated in terms of how they can be translated in different ways. And here we have an example. Verse 44 at the end. As a testimony against them is a way of understanding what Jesus says.

And it is used, the very same language is used in this more hostile sense on other occasions in Mark's gospel. Let me just give you one example. In chapter 6 and in verse 11.

And Jesus sends out the 12. And they're rejected in some of the communities they go to. And Jesus says, And if any place will not welcome you or listen to, shake the dust off your feet when you leave as a testimony against them.

[32 : 32] What Jesus seems to be saying is that the priest and the religious class that he represents, it's a testimony against them. So not just against this one individual, though he's included and represents the whole.

The priest will be accused and condemned on the basis of the testimony that he received, that they received and witnessed concerning Jesus and yet refused to believe.

Because we know that largely that was what happened. The religious establishment rejected Jesus. They would not believe in Jesus despite the testimony concerning him.

Despite all that they saw. Think of this one priest. This one priest, he was witness to this remarkable healing of a leper. And yet how did he respond?

Did that experience, did that task that he performed, serve as a testimony against him? Indeed, on the day of judgment, will it serve as a testimony against him?

[33 : 40] You saw that and yet did not follow Jesus? You saw that and yet did not explore further? You were witness to that and yet you did not believe? Well, if indeed this is the way in which we can understand these words, it is a sobering thought and it certainly points to a sobering reality because the principle holds today.

The more we know concerning Jesus, the greater our responsibility to respond to Jesus. Indeed, as you leave this place today, you will have upon you a greater responsibility than when you came through the door an hour ago.

And if you refuse to repent and believe, then your presence here is a testimony against you because you have been confronted with this man, Jesus.

The man who is willing. The man who is able. What will you do with this man, Jesus? What will you do with the Lord who speaks in this way and who acts in this way?

You are the leper, unable to cleanse and restore yourself, as am I. But the Lord is able and he is willing.

[35 : 08] Today you have been given testimony to that reality. What will you do with that testimony? I would urge you to repent and to believe the good news.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you that he is indeed the one who is spoken of and described as filled with compassion.

We thank you that as we see Jesus, as we see the Son, we see the Father. And so we come and we pray to a God who is full of compassion. We thank you for your willingness to save.

We thank you for your ability and capacity and power to save. We pray that by your Spirit you would help us to see our need, to appreciate the gravity of our condition, and to come and to seek that healing and that restoration that only you can grant us in and through your Son, Jesus Christ.

And we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. We're going to sing to God's praise, and we're going to sing from Psalm 116.

[36 : 26] You'll find it on page 154 in our psalm books. Psalm 116, verses 1 to 9.

And I will sing to the tune, That was the experience of the leper, and it can be our experience too. Psalm 116, verses 1 to 9. Let's stand to sing. Amen. I love the Lord because he heard my voice.

He listened when I cry to him for it.

I'll call on him as long as I shall live.

[37 : 37] He trust he turned to hear me pray thy way.

That heart of death will turn and entangle me.

Upon me gave me languish of the grave.

When we can't shout, I was overcome.

Then on the name of God I called, Lord, sing.

[38 : 37] The Lord our God is kind and full of praise.

O righteous and compassionate is he.

The Lord protects all those of childlike faith.

When I was in great need, he rescued me.

He rescued me. Rest, O my soul, God has been good to you.

[39 : 43] For you, O Lord, have saved my soul from death.

My feet from something. And my eyes from tears.

That I may live for you. While I have rest.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen. Amen. .

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[40 : 47] .