

Mark 1:40-45

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[0 : 00] You can picture the scene as the leper approaches Jesus and falls to his knees before him.

And the two characters before us as we imagine the scene constitute a very striking contrast. On the one hand we have Jesus, the undefiled Son of the living God, and on his knees before him one who is defiled from head to toe, a leper, defiled in every way, physically defiled, ceremonially defiled, socially excluded, an outcast.

And there we have these two characters before us as we have encountered them in the passage that we've read in the Gospel of Mark. And in the verses that we have read there are no other characters, just Jesus and the leper.

And we, an audience as it were, looking in on this encounter. And we can draw lessons from both of these characters, both from Jesus and from the leper.

And the manner in which we are going to endeavor to draw out these lessons is to consider both Jesus and the leper as we look at their heart, their hands, and their words.

[1 : 46] So for both, for Jesus and the leper. And I'll just outline what it is we're going to say in that regard for both Jesus and the leper, and then we can move on and consider the outline that we'll present now in a moment.

First of all, with regard to Jesus, we will notice how Jesus was one with a heart that is moved. So concerning his heart, a heart that is moved.

And hands that touch and words that heal. So that, with regard to Jesus. A heart that is moved. Hands that touch. And words that heal.

But then of the leper. We will notice that in him we find a heart that believes. Hands that are healed. And words that disobey.

So that gives you a bit of an outline there. I don't know if it's two points or six points. You can take your pick. And we'll see how we get on.

[2 : 56] First of all, Jesus then. The first thing that we want to highlight concerning Jesus is his heart. A heart that is moved. In verse 41 we're told that Jesus was filled with compassion.

The leper is on his knees before him. And this is how Mark describes Jesus. Filled with compassion. And I think that's really as good a translation as you could get.

That captures the manner in which the plight of this leper moves the very heart of Jesus. Jesus is moved to his very core. To his very heart.

He feels the pain of the leper who is before him. He empathizes with his plight. He understands the misery that his leprosy has brought him and continues to bring him.

And he is moved by all of this. His heart is moved. That was true of Jesus on this occasion.

[4 : 03] It was true of Jesus when this man, this leper, came and bowed down before him. But of course, we know, and it is a familiar truth, but an important one nonetheless.

We know that Jesus is the same. Yesterday, today, and forever. And nothing has changed in this regard. The heart of Jesus is still a heart that is moved.

Moved not only by some leper from long ago. But moved also by your pain. Moved also by your plight.

Moved also by your heartache. Whatever the cause might be. Maybe very, very different circumstances to the leper. And yet, in Jesus, we have one whose heart is moved.

Now, that's important for us to remember. It is a comfort to us. But it shouldn't only constitute a comfort. It should also constitute a challenge.

[5 : 07] A challenge because we are disciples of Jesus. Indeed, we are told, and this is a wonderful truth, that God's purpose for us is that we be transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

And so, if we discover in Jesus one whose heart is moved, then we ought to seek in our own heart an ever-increasing likeness to Him.

That our hearts would also be hearts that are moved. Hearts that are moved in the face of human suffering as it comes before us.

That it would be true of us also that we are filled with compassion. And I think we can do no better than simply leave that question hanging, as it were, for all of us.

For all of us to examine our own hearts, literally our own hearts, and ask if that is true of us. But that's the first thing, then, that I wanted us to notice concerning Jesus as we have Him presented it to us in this passage.

[6 : 16] A heart that is moved. But secondly, I want you to notice that in Jesus we have one whose hands touch. Hands that touch.

This encounter between Jesus and the leper is recorded in Mark's Gospel, and it's also recorded for us by Matthew and by Luke. And as is customary and parallel accounts, there are differences in the level of detail.

One evangelist makes reference to a detail that another does not, and that's as we would expect. But in the case of this particular encounter, there is one element of the story that is told by all three evangelists.

An element that perhaps, I say perhaps, because maybe others think differently, but perhaps an element that would appear to be of secondary importance. And it is this, that Jesus, as we read there in Mark's Gospel, reached out His hand and touched the man.

Matthew records that for us. Mark does so, Mark does so, as we've read, and Luke also does so. All are persuaded that this is important.

[7 : 34] All out of the opinion that this is something their readers must know about. That Jesus touches this man. And it does rather beg the question, well, why is this important?

Why do they all consider it necessary to record this? Evidently it happened. So at one level they're simply describing what happened. But equally, no doubt there are other elements that they leave unrecorded.

Why do they record this very particularly and very specifically? Was the touch of Jesus that we read of necessary for the healing?

I think we can very confidently say that it wasn't necessary. I would go further and suggest that it wasn't even an element of the miracle.

The touch that we have here I don't think we should understand as a miraculous touch. It seems to me very clear, though again I invite you to read it for yourselves and see what conclusion you come to.

[8 : 38] It seems to me very clear that the miraculous element in this encounter are the words that Jesus addresses. Be clean. And we'll come to that in a moment. The touch is just that.

It's a touch. It is a human touch as Jesus touches this man. Jesus touches the leper.

Jesus touches the defiled one. Jesus touches the outcast. Jesus touches the one nobody else would touch.

I wonder how long had it been since anybody had touched this man? I wonder. Are we talking weeks?

Are we talking months? Are we talking years? When was the last time somebody had touched this man? We don't know. But Jesus touches the leper.

[9 : 37] Now, a leper, as we know, because the Bible tells us in the Mosaic law and God's law given through Moses, particularly in Leviticus chapter 14, we're not going to read it now, but if you wish, by all means do so later on.

It gives us detailed instructions as to leprosy and what was required of lepers and so on and so forth. Indeed, there's reference to some of that in this passage that we're going to come on to in a moment.

And we know that the leper was not simply the victim of a physical ailment. He was also subject to ceremonial and to social exclusion.

He was, we can use the word, an untouchable. An untouchable. And yet this leper was an untouchable who was touched by Jesus.

As some consider the passage, they give some thought to asking the question, was Jesus defiled by touching the leper?

[10:47] The law suggested that that would be the outcome. Of course, you might say, well, of course, as Jesus heals him, then there would be no reason for the defilement. The point is sometimes made in reference to this touching and the defilement or otherwise that it would produce.

The point is made that Jesus, far from being defiled himself, cleansed the leper of his defilement. Well, that is in great measure true. But I do wonder, and I don't think I would put it more strongly than that, I wonder if we should be careful in too quickly shying away from the picture of Jesus, if you wish, getting his hands dirty in his touching of the leper.

What we can certainly be sure of is that there would have been those who were witnesses to this, who would have considered that he was indeed defiled by this action.

This is not a Jesus who ministers to the needy from afar. This is a Jesus who gets involved.

This is a Jesus, if we can use the language, this is a Jesus who gets his hands dirty. And of course, again, as we bring this to our own time and circumstances, we can confidently say that this is a Jesus who is willing to get involved in your life, however much of a mess it might be in.

[12:23] The leper's life was one big mess, one miserable life in many ways. And yet Jesus was willing to get involved in his life.

And he remains willing to get involved in our lives. But again, as we think that along these lines, not only as a comfort, but also as a challenge.

What about us as disciples of Jesus? Are we willing to touch the untouchables? Indeed, who are the untouchables in our own society?

Are we willing to get involved? Are we willing to get our hands dirty? So this is the second thing I wanted us to notice here in this passage.

Not only a heart that is moved, but hands that touch. But the third element concerning Jesus is that we find here words that heal.

[13:24] In verse 41, we find the words that are addressed by Jesus to the leper. The leper has already spoken his own words, and we'll come to them in a moment.

If you are willing, you can make me clean. And then Jesus responds to these words of the leper. We read that Jesus says the following, I am willing, be clean.

They are simple words. They are dramatic words. Indeed, there is a symmetry between what the leper says and Jesus' response. It's quite a striking symmetry.

The leper says, if you are willing. Jesus says, I am willing. The leper says, you can make me clean. And Jesus says, be clean. If we think of these words.

First of all, the words we have recorded here, I am willing. Again, if we can, and of course it's very difficult for us to do so, but if we can, even in a small measure, try and place ourselves in the position of the leper, how must he have felt when he heard those words?

[14:33] I am willing. We will come to the leper in a moment, but I wonder how many people today can share the uncertainty of the leper.

Is Jesus really willing? Is he really willing? Is he really willing to respond to me in my situation?

Is he really willing to reach out his hand? Does he really care about me? Oh, I know he's powerful. I know he's able. But is he willing?

Well, the leper was given the reply. The reply, I don't know if he expected. Certainly the reply that he wished for. I am willing.

Jesus continues to be willing to help us. The manner in which he helps us may be different to the manner in which we would like to be helped. But his willingness to help, his willingness to respond to our cry for help is unchanged.

[15:41] Again, this is a comfort to us. But again, it also constitutes a challenge. Are we willing? Are we willing to get involved?

Are we willing to respond to the cry for help that is directed to us? So these are the first words that Jesus addresses to the man, if you are willing.

But then there are the other words. Be clean. These words that heal as we've described them.

Again, the clarity and the simplicity is striking.

In Greek, it is just one word. In fact, all of what Jesus says, as it's recorded for us there in verse 41, I am willing, be clean. All of that is just two words in the original.

Two words that were spoken. I am willing. Be clean. And in these simple but striking words, the authority of Jesus is very evident.

[16:51] Indeed, the power of Jesus is so visible and tangible in his expressing these words and in the impact of them. Very particularly these words, be clean.

And of course, as we've read, the man is cured of his incurable disease. And he is cured, as Mark is careful to highlight immediately.

Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Indeed, the manner in which it's presented to us suggests that as the words were pronounced, as the very words were pronounced, be clean.

The healing was secure completely and permanently. And of course, Jesus enjoys that same power and authority today.

It is, of course, his prerogative to exercise that power and authority as he sees fit. And he will not always exercise it in the way that we might want or prefer.

[17:55] But he may, as he chooses on occasion, do as he did on this occasion. He may choose to heal in a miraculous and in an instantaneous way.

That is his prerogative. But whether he does or whether he doesn't, he remains equally committed to securing our ultimate and complete healing.

Of that we can be sure. As we think of how this is a challenge to us, we might say, well, this is a little bit different. Because we certainly don't have the power to heal that Jesus has.

But we can be instruments of Jesus in bringing healing to broken lives. And so the question for us is, are we? Are we those instruments that we are called to be?

So, Jesus, a heart that is moved. What else? Hands that touch and words that heal.

[19:03] But moving on to the leper and following that same pattern. First of all, concerning the leper, a heart that believes. Now, if you have read the passage with me, as you have, and as you've maybe given some thought to this heading, you might be asking the question, well, does he believe?

Or what does he believe? And that's a good question to ask. What is it that the leper believes? Well, I think there are certain things we can say confidently. We can say confidently that this leper believed that Jesus could heal him of his leprosy.

He says so very explicitly. If you are willing, you can make me clean. There is an element of doubt, but the doubt doesn't concern Jesus' ability to heal him.

He has no doubts, it would seem, concerning the power of Jesus and the ability of Jesus. He has some doubts concerning Jesus' willingness to do so. But no doubts, it would appear, as to his capacity to do so.

So, he believes that Jesus can heal him of his leprosy. Now, that is no small matter. And he is to be commended for this solid conviction. Notice that we are at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

[20:19] Yes, there had been miracles. And yes, it's true that we are not to take the accounts in the Gospels as strictly in chronological order. But it is certainly the case that this is near the beginning of his public ministry.

And so, we have no reason to believe that the leper would have had many eyewitness testimonies to grant him this security or this confidence in the capacity of Jesus to heal.

But it is clear that he believes that he can. I think we can go further. I think we can also say that this man, this leper, appears to believe that Jesus could go beyond simply the healing of his physical ailment or disease.

The very word that the leper uses, if you are willing, you can make me clean. He could have said, if you are willing, you can heal me. But he doesn't.

He uses a different word. He says, if you are willing, you can make me clean. And under this, the umbrella, if you wish, of this word, you can make me clean, that is imply not only his physical restoration to health, but also the removal of his ceremonial defilement, the breaking of this social exclusion that he is under.

[21:37] Now, it may be that the man is simply working it out and he is saying, well, if Jesus can heal me physically, as I believe he can, then a necessary consequence of that is that I will thus be ceremonially clean and no longer excluded as I currently am.

It may be simply the man working it out. That would be a reasonable way to imagine the outcome of any healing that he might enjoy. But I wonder if there is not in these words of the leper also a recognition or a conviction that in this man Jesus there is one not only with the power to heal his illness, so power in the physical realm as it were, in the material realm of his physical condition, but

also a recognition that somehow in Jesus there is authority also in the spiritual realm to cleanse him of his defilement.

Well, we can maybe come to different conclusions, and of course we can't conclusively determine in what measure this man believed.

But it's certainly true that he believed in some genuine and meaningful way. And yet, what is certainly true is that he is not persuaded that Jesus is willing to heal him.

Persuaded that Jesus is able, but not persuaded that Jesus is willing. He simply doesn't know. He certainly hopes that he will. It would have made no sense to even approach Jesus if there had not been some hope, some expectation.

[23 : 18] But he approaches Jesus in the hope that perhaps Jesus might be willing. He entertains doubts on that matter.

And as we think of that place that he was in, I wonder, is it not similar to many today? Are there not those, perhaps even this evening there can be those, who believe a great deal concerning Jesus? Believe what the Bible says concerning who Jesus is? Believe in his power to heal? Believe in his power to forgive? Believe in his power to save? And in a genuine way, believe these things to be true of Jesus?

And yet, doubt concerning his willingness to do so for me. Will he forgive me? Will he save me?

Well, maybe we can relate or be sympathetic to the leper and his believing heart in a measure.

But there is also in this leper hands, hands that are healed. I wonder again if we can imagine for a moment how the man responds to this order that Jesus gives concerning his healing.

[24 : 44] Be clean. I wonder if there was any sensation in his body, a physical sensation as this miracle takes place.

I wonder if he could feel a sense of wholeness. In Luke's account of this incident, we are given a little extra insight as to the gravity of his condition.

We are told in chapter 5 of Luke's gospel in verse 12 that this man was covered with leprosy. He was covered with leprosy. We can imagine from head to toe.

There wasn't a part of his body that wasn't afflicted by this condition. Covered with leprosy. And I just wonder when Jesus says to him, be clean. I wonder what would be the first thing that he would do?

What would be the first place that he would look? And I imagine, and maybe this is just nonsense, but I imagine him looking at his hands. Looking at his hands. The first thing you can see, isn't it?

[25 : 42] He looks at his hands. And these hands, as Luke makes clear, part of this body that had been covered with leprosy.

These hands are changed. These hands are clean. These hands are no longer defiled. No longer any evidence of the leprosy.

No longer even wounds that are healing. No longer even scars that would give an indication of what he had suffered. He's been cleansed fully and absolutely.

Healed hands. Restored. And of course, not just his hands. But as he continues to observe in wonder his whole body before him, he sees that from head to toe, he has been fully and wholly restored.

We live in a world where we are often hurt. Where there can be in us, and of course in others, many wounds and scars.

[26 : 48] Part of who we are. Part of what we are. Part of the life that we have lived. But in our Savior, in Jesus, we have one who will, in his good time, fully restore us of every wound, of every scar, as he did with this man.

Hands that are healed. But then finally, words that disobey. Words that disobey. As we've read there in Mark's Gospel, following the healing, the leper is given what we're told is a strong warning by Jesus.

And he's instructed to do something quite specific. We can just remind ourselves there in verses 43 and 44. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning.

And the language here, I am told, is very severe almost. This was in very grave terms.

Very serious terms. Jesus is warning him sternly. Don't tell anyone. But go show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.

[28 : 07] The indications that Jesus gives him are very clear. They're easy to understand. And the man would have known exactly what they meant and exactly what was required of him.

He would need to go to Jerusalem. And he would need to identify the priest that was tasked with this particular duty and do what Jesus tells him to do. We're told there that the reason for doing so was that this would serve as a testimony to them.

There in verse 44. A testimony presumably to the priest and to those who surround him. A testimony to them. Even that phrase is open to different ways of understanding it.

That's not our primary concern this evening. But at the simplest level, and perhaps this is always a good policy to go for the most simple explanation. It was a testimony to them that he was healed. That he no longer had leprosy. They would be able to confirm that that was the case. I wonder, as others have wondered, whether there is not something more here. A testimony to them, perhaps, of the healing power of this man Jesus.

[29 : 13] At the very heart of Jerusalem. A testimony to what Jesus could do for a leper. A testimony, perhaps, also to the manner in which Jesus, though he was able to do such great things, still considered himself to be under the law and respectful of it in directing the leper in this way.

Well, we can leave that to one sign. Our interest here in this final part is with the leper. And what does he do? And we are considering it under this heading, words, that disobeys.

Because that is indeed what he does. He disobeys the command that Jesus gives him. And as we think of his disobedience, we maybe could pose the question, well, was it so bad?

Of course, it's always bad to disobey, as we were reminding ourselves this morning. Disobeying God is never a good idea. It always ends up in tears. So I'm not wanting to minimize in any way disobedience.

But we are drawn, I suppose, to ask the question, was this so bad what he was doing? What was he doing? He was telling other people about Jesus. He was telling them about what Jesus had done for him.

[30 : 21] He was singing the praises of Jesus, I'm sure. Was it so bad what he did? I think we have to say, yes, it was. The instruction was clear.

The tone was grave, was serious. And yet the leper, the healed leper, he felt that he knew better than Jesus. And so he speaks these words of disobedience.

He speaks to all and sundry about what had happened to him, despite the very clear indications he had been given by Jesus to do otherwise. And it's a curious picture in a way.

Because here we have a man who thought the world of Jesus. Here we have a man who was genuinely grateful to Jesus. Here we have a man who is singing the praises of Jesus. And yet here we have a man who at the very same time is disobeying Jesus.

That may seem a very strange combination. How common is that? And yet as we ponder on how it may well be common and how it may well be repeated, is this picture of this leper singing the praises of Jesus and yet disobeying Jesus in one and the same breath, is that not a picture of so many of the churches in our land today?

[31 : 47] Professing effusive love for Jesus and yet going in completely the opposite direction to where Jesus would have us go. I leave it to you to fit the picture.

And of course we have to ask the question of ourselves. And I would close by doing that. Asking the question of ourselves individually. Are we or could we be guilty of something similar?

Professing loyalty to Jesus. Singing the praises of Jesus. And yet disobedient to Him. And that is something that we would do well to consider and to examine ourselves in that regard.

So this encounter, this striking contrast between Jesus and the leper. And in this picture we are given by Mark, we find Jesus as one whose heart is moved.

A heart that is still moved. We find hands that touch. And we find that He is still the one willing to get involved with us.

[32 : 52] Words that heal. Words that continue to heal. And of the leper. A heart that believed in a measure. Hands that were healed as evidence of God's power in his life.

But sadly and solemnly. Words that disobey. May we learn from both as the lesson would apply to us.

Let us pray.