

Introduction

I had my annual physical exam this week and got a good report. Thanks be to God. Good health means a lot. I think of how clearly that was brought home this summer when one of our church family was told they might have pancreatic cancer. What a relief to learn the tests were negative. It is difficult to fathom the advances that have been made in health care just in our lifetimes. It is far from perfect, but it is truly amazing what we have learned and how much health has improved.

In Jesus’ days on earth, the health care situation was much different. Disease was rampant. And it was destructive. Overcoming disease was more a matter of outlasting it. People who survived diseases often bore lasting effects like loss of hearing, loss of sight, and withered body parts. In the midst of such distress came the Son of God. Jesus was baptized and then he embarked on his earthly ministry. He went throughout Galilee teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and affliction. Great crowds followed him. And it is no wonder. Jesus spoke with authority and he ruled the world of disease with authority. So Matthew in chapters 5-7 provides for us one of Jesus’ sermons at the end of which the people were astonished. They were amazed at his authority. After the incredible sermon on the mount, Matthew begins to convey some of the specific healings and miracles Jesus performed. The healings are important in and of themselves, but out of thousands, Matthew tells us of these. So it is important for us to look carefully at them. While we learn that there was no disease Jesus could not heal, there are other matters of importance that arise in each case that command our attention as well. This morning in Matthew 8:1-4, we are presented with Jesus’ healing of a leper.

[Read Text; Pray]

The narrative presents several items of significance with reference to the healing. First, I want you to see . . .

I. The Attraction to Jesus

People were attracted to Jesus. When he finished the sermon on the mount, the crowds were astonished. And in the very first verse of chapter 8, Matthew reports that when Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. It appears that these crowds followed Jesus because they were astonished. They were amazed. He was saying things and doing things that were interesting, amazing, and mind-boggling. Unlike the religious leaders of the day, Jesus displayed authority. They wanted to hear more and see more. They came because they were amazed.

In contrast to the great crowds, however, Matthew directs our attention to one person in particular who stands in distinction from the crowds. Matthew refers to him as a leper. He was sick. He was plagued with disease. He was unclean. He was not coming to Jesus purely because of astonishment. He was coming to Jesus because of need. He did not simply want to watch and to listen and be amazed by what Jesus could do. He wanted to experience the power and authority of Jesus in his own life to change him.

The difference between the leper and the crowds is also a difference I observe among people today. On the one hand there are interested onlookers. These are people who might be amazed and astonished and they enjoy the show so to speak, but there is little impact on their hearts. There is little actual change within them. They are content to watch. They attend the games. They sit in the bleachers. They enjoy the excitement. They cheer and applaud the work being done by others, but they are too busy to let it get personal with them. They do not come as people in need of a change but people who like to be entertained. Offer rousing entertainment and they will come. But that is no guarantee that they will be changed. They seek excitement not involvement.

On the other hand, there are those who follow Jesus because they know that they need to be something that they are not. They need a change. They need healing. They need cleansing only he can provide. To follow Jesus in this way is to follow Jesus not with mere curiosity but with your heart. It is to seek that he would transform you, change you, leave the marks of his hands all over your life.

In light of this point I urge you to ponder this question: Has Jesus captured your curiosity or has Jesus captured your heart and life? Are you in it simply to be amazed or are you in it to be changed?

Next we need to consider . . .

II. The Curse of Leprosy

Leprosy was one of the most feared and dreaded diseases of biblical days. It was not so much that it was physically painful as it was physically reprehensible and socially destructive. The disease caused numbness that would keep people from the importance of noticing pain. Hence they could easily injure themselves without even knowing. Lesions on the skin would become open sores.

One researcher describes the disease as follows:

As the sickness progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears, begins to bunch, with deep furrows between the swellings, so that the face of the afflicted individual begins to resemble that of a lion. Fingers drop off or are absorbed; toes are affected similarly. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. By this time one can see the person in this pitiable condition is a leper. One can even smell it, for the leper emits a very unpleasant odor. Moreover, in view of the fact that the disease-producing agent frequently also attacks the larynx, the leper's voice acquires a grating quality. . . . [and] you can hear [it in] his rasping voice."

Aptly put by William Hughes, "Leprosy turned a man into a living corpse."

Under the law of Moses, when certain kinds of skin spots appeared, the person would have to appear before the priest to be examined. If the priest was unsure, the person would be quarantined for a week, after which he or she would be examined again. The priest would have to make a determination. If it was determined the person had leprosy, he would be declared UNCLEAN. Numbers 13:45 says, "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."

In Numbers 5:1-3, the Lord directed Moses to "Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous . . . You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell."

Here is why the disease was so dreaded. It not only robbed a person of health and made them repulsive, but the disease isolated them from their family and community. Can you imagine receiving the test results from the priest? Being unclean as a leper meant being parted from your spouse, your children, and family for the rest of your life unless by some miracle you were healed. And in this way as well, the leper was isolated from the presence and worship of God. It was a disease so serious that one's identity became absorbed in it so that a person who had leprosy was not merely considered sick, but was called a leper.

Now let's note again, when Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold (notice something striking), a leper came to him. He was supposed to have kept his distance but he drew near. Luke (5:12) tells us "he was full of leprosy." So this man was in the advanced stages of the disease. Can you imagine a more desperate physical condition? So he dared to come even in the face of the crowd to Jesus to seek cleansing.

It is abundantly clear that this dreadful disease is an unmistakable emblem of sin. Leprosy deadens the nerves, and sin dulls the conscience and heart so that the sinner suppresses the truth about God and pierces himself with many a pang and plunges further and further in it, offending God and sinking himself into greater and greater ruin. Leprosy disfigures the body and sin disfigures the soul, making it reprehensible before Holy God. Leprosy also divided people from fellowship with God's people and from the worship of God himself. Sin does the same thing, separating us from God and dividing us from one another. The only way to feel rightly about our sin is to be aghast and ashamed, acknowledging our condition is reprehensible, and we cannot help our condition ourselves. Finally, the only way to be rid of leprosy is to be cleansed. Did you notice that the leper does not use the language of healing but of cleansing? As leprosy made a man ceremonially unclean, it needed to be cleansed. Likewise, sin makes a man morally

unclean, and the only remedy is cleansing. David prays in Psalm 51: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."

Desperation drove the leper to approach Jesus. And when we recognize and acknowledge our sin, it should do the same in us. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

We live in a world that plays down sin. Instead of sin, it speaks of mistakes. Instead of disobedience, it speaks of doing things my way. Instead of rebellion, it speaks of being human. But no. Sin is to the soul what leprosy is to the body. It renders us ugly and repulsive to God himself. Through the pen of Isaiah, God speaks of the sinful people of Judah. He says, "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil." Sin causes the Lord to hide his face. When you come in your sinful arrogance before him, he considers it a trampling of his courts. To God the mouth of a sinner is an open grave. As a man with leprosy is a leper, we who sin are sinners. It is our identity. The first step to coming before Jesus rightly is coming to acknowledge and admit ourselves to be sinners. Our selfishness is a stench. Our anger is abhorrent. Our pride is putrid. Our rebellion is reprehensible. In our sin we are cut off from God and his kingdom. We don't have the right to approach him any more than the leper had the right to approach Jesus. If you are not in Christ, this morning, you are reprehensible and cut off from God. And if you die without coming to Christ, that is what you will be eternally. But you can come to Jesus for help as did this leper!

The Leper is a prime example of . . .

III. The Way to Come to Jesus

Four characteristics stand out.

A. He was bold. Boldness is seen in the fact that he came and that he came so close. Here was this multitude around Jesus. And here was a man who was supposed to keep a safe distance. You may remember the encounter Jesus had with 10 lepers at one time. Luke's gospel records that

they STOOD AT A DISTANCE and lifted up their voices. Not the man in our text this morning. He drew near despite his condition. It is not out of the realm of possibility that he had been standing at a distance and listening to the sermon of Jesus. Convinced of the authority with which Jesus spoke, he is convinced Jesus can help him out of his miserable condition. So he draws near.

Every Christian is urged to do the same as this leper. Come boldly before him. Do not hesitate. Do not hold back. He is able to help. The writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers this way: "Since we have a great high priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14-16)

B. The leper was bold, but he was also reverent. Look how he came. "He knelt before Jesus saying, "Lord." The leper prostrated himself before Jesus. He assumed a position of worship. He bowed before Jesus. And he verbally acknowledged him as Lord. Now some may say that this was simply a form of politeness as in saying, "Sir." But he was ascribing power to Jesus that alone belongs to God. So I am definitely taking this leper to be humbling himself before Jesus as the Lord. And he is. Without Jesus nothing would exist. All things were made through him. Without him nothing was made that has been made. He is the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth.

God does not exist for us. We exist for him. Prayer is a precious gift that God has given. He did not give it for us to trample his courts with our arrogance and pride. Coming boldly does not mean coming brashly. Boldness must be tempered with reverence and honor. Acknowledging his holiness, and his power, his centrality, and his glory should permeate our demeanor and our hearts as we draw near to God.

C. The leper was bold and reverent. And he also exhibited faith. To Jesus he said, "YOU CAN make me clean." I can think of 2 lepers prior to this

time who were healed of leprosy. One was Miriam, the sister of Moses and the other was the Syrian army commander Namaan. Miriam was struck with leprosy when she opposed Moses. Moses prayed for her and the Lord let her back in to the camp after seven days. Namaan, not a Jew, obeyed the counsel of Elisha, prophet of the Lord, and dipped seven times in the Jordan River and was miraculously made clean. The leper who came to Jesus was not concerned by how rare it was to be cleansed of leprosy. He was convinced Jesus was able to do it. This faith no doubt pleased the Lord. Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it is impossible to please God. There was no question in the mind of the leper of Jesus' ability.

You and I can and should pray the same way. The Lord can do anything he wants. He is able to move mountains, heal leprosy and other diseases. And he is able to cleanse sinners.

D. The leper was bold, reverent, and believing. But he was also submissive. This is striking! He was convinced of Jesus' ability but knew his cleansing would be a matter of Jesus' willing. "IF YOU WILL you can make me clean." Mark and Luke inform us that the leper was indeed imploring Jesus, not just stating facts. He knew Jesus was able and he was imploring him to make him clean, but he also knew that he was subject to the sovereign will of Christ. It would seem he heard what Jesus taught about prayer, that one should pray, "YOUR WILL be done on earth as it is in heaven." So he pleads for cleansing and submits to the will of Christ.

When you come to Christ in prayer, and your main concern is the will of God, you are in a good place. This is the way to come before Jesus: boldly, reverently, believing, and submitting to his will.

IV. The Astounding Authority of Jesus

The gospels of Matthew Mark Luke and John expose for us the greatness and majesty of our Lord. And one of the central demonstrations in these gospels is that Jesus is Lord over all. He possesses absolute authority. He is the Son of God. He rules the universe. It is because he came as Lord that we have good news to believe and a gospel to preach. His miraculous works bear testimony to him and to the fact that he is the son of God—that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. And this astounding authority is

magnified in this miraculous cleansing of the leper. I want you to see it in two ways.

A. First, Jesus' authority is magnified in a demonstration of power. To the leper's plea, Jesus said, "I will." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. No medication. No treatments. And no waiting. You know, I had to wait 10-15 minutes just to get in to the doctor this week and then another 40 to get my blood drawn. And I am not even sick. But this guy, his body full of leprosy, deformed, grotesque, and repulsive was instantaneously transformed. He was instantaneously cleansed. No waiting, no wondering, no hoping. Just experiencing newness of life. This terrible and destructive disease was defeated immediately and completely. This is extraordinary power. It is divine power. Jesus is the Son of God.

When we come to the gospel, we are not talking about human theories or fairy tales or old wives' tales or religious superstition or philosophical theology. When we come to the gospel, we are coming to Jesus. He is not a comic-book superhero. He is not a figment of the imagination. He is the Son of God. He did do these works—thousands and thousands of them. They bear witness to him and to his words. Drink this in anew. Marvel that our faith has a firm resting place in Christ.

And when we come to the gospel we come to the assurance of immediate change. The old hymn puts it well. "The vilest offender who truly believes THAT MOMENT from Jesus a pardon receives." It power great enough to completely cleanse from sin. Last week Doug Ferrell reminded us from Romans 8:1 that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Today we are also reminded that there is CLEANSING for those who are in Christ Jesus. We are free from condemnation if we are in Christ but we are also free from the disfigurement of sin. The leper said if you will, you can make me clean. And Jesus replied, "I will. Be clean." And immediately the leprosy was cleansed. Jesus does the same for those who come to him for healing of their sin wrecked lives. 1 John 1:7 says, "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his son CLEANSSES us from all sin." 1:9 says, "If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to CLEANSE us from ALL unrighteousness." Now with your minds in this groove of

cleansing, here these words from Paul in Ephesians 5. "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having CLEANSED her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish!"

Listen. Isn't it glorious to know that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? And isn't it also glorious to know that if you are in Christ, you are cleansed? The leprosy of sin is removed. The ugliness is taken away! If you are in Christ, you are no longer reprehensible! You are no longer a stench in the nostrils of God! It is no longer a trampling of God's courts when you come before him! So what should you do? Come before him! Come with thanks! Come with praise! Come for the fellowship. And come to be sent out to show the world what great things God can do!

B. Second, Jesus' authority is magnified in a demonstration of compassion. Perhaps the most shocking part of this encounter at least to the onlookers is this: Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper. Under Mosaic law, you are not supposed to touch a leper or you would be unclean. That would be true of any ordinary person but not with Jesus. When Jesus touches the unclean, the unclean becomes clean. And Jesus' touch here is such a testimony of compassion.

Human touch is a precious gift of which lepers were deprived. The touch communicated mercy and love and the administration of cleansing from Jesus to the leper personally. Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus felt great compassion for the leper. Well we see it in the touch and in his words and in his willingness to cleanse him.

And I want you to know that the risen Christ we worship is the same today as he was then. Same in power and same in compassion. He has mercy on all who will draw near to him in faith and submission. Marvel at the Christ who is our Savior.

Conclusion

Jesus had a final bit of counsel for the leper. He told him to say nothing to anyone but to go show himself to the priest and offer what the law of Moses called for. The priest would be obligated to admit the man was clean and it would validate what Jesus had done and strengthen the case to believe in him. Likewise the world today needs to see simple devotion and obedience to Jesus by his disciples. That simple obedience and worship will point the witnesses all around us to Christ by pointing the power of Christ at work in us. So let your lights shine you who are cleansed.

If you are not in Christ today, you have spiritual leprosy. You need to be cleansed. Come to Jesus today to be cleansed. Bow your heart before him and say, "Lord, you can if you will." And he will. He will pardon you and cleanse you. Do it now!

If you are in Christ, what reason to rejoice. What news to share! Glory in your redeemer. Rejoice in his cleansing work. And see to it that you walk in obedience and worship.