

*Jesus Touches the Untouchable: Mark 1:40-45*  
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This morning we come to the last verses in Mark 1. We've been observing the various demonstrations of Jesus' authority in this chapter as He has been teaching with authority, casting out demons, and healing many who were sick with various diseases. And all of this verifies that His message is true. Indeed, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Therefore, we should heed His command to repent and believe in the gospel. That's what Jesus preaches in 1:15.

Last time we looked at a day in the life of Jesus. Verses 21-39 record the events of one 24-hour period. The day started in the synagogue in Capernaum, and then moved to the house of Simon and Andrew where Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law, and then that evening healed many and cast out many demons. And then very early the next morning He went out to a desolate place to pray. From there, verse 39 tells us, Jesus "went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons." Next Mark records this amazing story of Jesus cleansing a leper, and this is what we're going to study this morning. Here we see the authority of Jesus again. And in addition to the miraculous aspect of this event, we also see the compassion Jesus had for this outcast. We see here that Jesus touches the untouchable.

#### **The Untouchable Leper (verse 40)**

Verse 40 begins by simply telling us that a leper came to Jesus. When the Bible speaks of leprosy it can be referring to a wide range of skin diseases. It's likely that this man had the horrific disease which is known today as Hansen's disease. Or it could have possibly been any number of other chronic skin diseases. Leviticus 13-14 gives lengthy instructions for how the Israelite priests were to deal with these skin diseases. For those who were determined to have leprosy the sentence was severe. It was not only a disease that afflicted the body, it was also something that rendered a person unclean and therefore cut off from the community. This is what it says in Leviticus 13:45-46, "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." This was not merely a disease. It was also a sentence to social isolation and humiliation. Imagine the embarrassment of having to cry out, "Unclean,

unclean,” so that everyone would flee from you. Imagine the loneliness of such a life. Imagine the emotional anguish of having to leave your home, your family, your friends, your community.

This was the condition of this man who approached Jesus. It is likely that this man had experienced no physical contact with anyone for years, maybe decades. Ever since he had contracted the disease he had been effectively banished from society. Maybe he had interaction with other lepers, like we see in Luke 17:12 where Jesus “was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance.” Maybe he wasn’t entirely alone, but he was certainly an outcast of society.

This leper, unlike the lepers in Luke 17, does not stand at a distance but comes right up to Jesus, within arm’s reach, and kneels down before Him, begging Him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” He was breaking all the laws and customs regarding lepers. He was risking it all. The man was desperate, as we can certainly imagine. He was desperate to have his former life back. He was desperate not only to be healed physically, but also to regain his place in the community. He wanted to be restored to his family. Notice his particular request. It is not, “make me well,” but “make me clean.” He asks not for healing, but for cleansing. And this is how the Gospels consistently speak of leprosy. In the case of other diseases, Jesus heals. But with leprosy, Jesus cleanses. That’s because leprosy was not merely a disease to be healed, but also a defilement that had to be cleansed.

The man must have heard about the amazing things that Jesus had been doing throughout Galilee, and he had hope that Jesus might work another miracle on his behalf. He doesn’t doubt Jesus’ ability in the least. He only wonders if Jesus is willing. “If you will, you can make me clean.”

### **The Spiritual Picture that Leprosy Portrays**

Before we move on to the next verses and see how Jesus responds to this man, I first want to think for a moment about the spiritual picture that leprosy portrays. In God’s providence this horrible disease provides us with a vivid picture of our spiritual condition apart from Christ. Josephus, who was a Jewish historian in the first century, described lepers as “in no way differing from a corpse.” They are like the living dead. And the disease has a curious way of destroying a person. It is actually a painless disease. But it’s the painlessness that destroys. Leprosy attacks the nerves in such a way that it anesthetizes the limbs, and the result is that the person doesn’t even realize when he’s injured himself. The hand gets burned without any pain. The toe gets crushed without any pain. The arms and legs are bruised without any pain. And gradually the body is just destroyed.

Think about how sin works in our lives. It is a destructive force that, apart from Christ, is often painless. If there's not the conviction of the Holy Spirit in our lives to prick the conscience, then a person continues in sin without even realizing what's happening. Sin leads to destruction as it anesthetizes the conscience. 1 Timothy 4:2 speaks of those who will depart from the faith and refers to individuals whose consciences are seared. This is the danger of our depravity. Without the sovereign work of God to save us from our sin, we would continue to destroy ourselves, numb to the effects of our sin.

Praise be to God that He does save sinners, even when we are unaware of the seriousness of our condition, even when our consciences are calloused and cannot feel any conviction of sin. Maybe you're here this morning and you have convinced yourself that you're a good person. You have justified your sins of pride or greed or adultery or lying, and you don't even realize that you are destroying yourself and heading down a path of destruction. Like a leper you are numb to the pain that you are bringing upon yourself and to those around you and numb to the infinite offense you are causing to God. My prayer is that even in this very moment God would move powerfully in your heart to awaken you to these realities. I pray that God will regenerate hearts today—that He will take out hard, calloused, leprous hearts and replace them sensitive hearts that are submissive to Him. He can do that, just like He can raise the dead.

In the Old Testament curing leprosy was seen as equivalent to raising the dead. Let me tell you very briefly the story of Namaan from 2 Kings 5. Namaan was a commander in the Syrian army, a very important man, a very powerful man. But he was a leper. On one of their raids they brought back a little Israelite girl who served in his house, and she said that Namaan could be cured if he went to see the prophet in Samaria. So Namaan went. He went right to the king of Israel, and he took lots of money and gifts. And the king of Israel said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?" Only God can raise the dead. And only God could cure Namaan's leprosy. Elisha the prophet then sent word to the king, "Let him come now to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Namaan went to Elisha's house, expecting to be greeted by Elisha and respected as an important and powerful man. He envisioned Elisha coming out and waving his hand over the place and having Namaan show his gratitude in some glamorous way. But it didn't happen that way. Elisha didn't even come out to meet Namaan. He just sent a messenger who told Namaan, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." But Namaan's pride

made it so that he didn't even want to do this. He wanted to be healed his way rather than humbling himself before this prophet or before God. You see, Namaan not only had leprosy in his physical body, he also had the leprosy of sinful pride in his heart. He wanted to earn his healing. He wanted to pay for his healing. But what he needed to do was humble himself and receive it as a free gift. One of the children's Bibles that we've used in our family devotions is *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, and it tells this story of Namaan in a wonderful way. At this point in the story it says, "All Namaan needed was nothing. It was the only thing Namaan didn't have." This was the leprosy of his heart. Well, Namaan's servants pleaded with him and convinced him to go ahead and do what Elisha said. And after dipping himself seven times in the Jordan, it says, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

I hope today that all of us with leprous hearts will be changed by the sovereign work of God, the healing power that comes not by works but by a free gift of grace. May we all recognize that we are lepers and are insensitive to the sins that are destroying us, and that we need to come to Jesus like this leper did in Mark 1 and plead with Him, "If you will, you can make me clean."

### **Jesus Touches the Untouchable (verses 41-42)**

We see the compassion of Jesus here, that He was moved with pity. Jesus has already healed many, many people, and He has cast out many demons. He has been preaching throughout all Galilee. But He is still moved with pity at the sight of this leper pleading for help. What verse 41 says next would have been absolutely shocking to watch. It says that Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. According to the laws and customs, this man should not have approached Jesus at all. He should have been calling out, Unclean, unclean, so that the people could move away from him and avoid any contact with him—indeed, avoid even coming close to him.

We can picture the scene. Those around Jesus at this moment would have recoiled at the sight of this leper. They would have stepped away in disgust and also in fear of contracting the disease. But as the others step away, Jesus reaches out His hand. As everyone else withdraws from this untouchable man, Jesus touches the untouchable. According to the law, this act would have rendered Jesus ceremonially unclean. It also would have been seen as an extremely risky move, putting Him in jeopardy of becoming a leper Himself. So we can imagine the gasps of those who were watching this. What is going on? What is Jesus doing?

But rather than Jesus becoming unclean, the leper becomes clean. Jesus heals the man with a touch and a word. He puts his hand on him and says, "I will; be clean." The authority of Jesus, demonstrated again here through His touch and His word. Jesus touches the untouchable and cleanses this leper. Verse 42 says, "And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean." This is like the situation just a few verses earlier when Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law. Back in verse 31 it says that Jesus "took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them." It was an immediate and complete healing. No recovery time was needed. No rehab was needed. She got right to work serving Jesus and His disciples. With the leper it is also an immediate and complete healing. And this would have been something to behold. With Simon's mother-in-law there may not have been many visible physical indications that her fever was gone. But with the leper, he may have been missing fingers or toes, his face could have been severely disfigured. There would have been many outward evidences of his disease. And it would have been astounding for those who were there to see this man's body fully restored right before their very eyes.

Again Jesus provides us with an example to follow. How are we doing in reaching out to those who are considered untouchable by the society around us? We ought to follow Jesus in seeking to touch the lives of those who are thought to be untouchable. We should be reaching out our hands to those who are sick and needy, those whom no one else cares about—homeless men and women, drug addicts, prostitutes. Pray about this. In what ways can we each reach out? Maybe God would lead one of you to organize a ministry to certain untouchables in our city.

For you young people who are in elementary school or middle school or high school, this is a very practical application for you as well. In any school there are certain kids who are ignored, made fun of. It's like they have leprosy. And if you try to befriend those individuals, you'll be made fun of too. It's like you're unclean now just for associating with kids who aren't in the right clique. I encourage you, young people, to follow the example of Jesus rather than following the mean-spirited and prideful attitude that we are all prone to. And if you find yourself on the other side of the equation, if you sometimes feel like the leper, the one who is ignored or made fun of, don't despair. Run to Jesus and put your hope in Him. The crowds are fickle and foolish. Don't pay attention to them. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

### **The Secret Proclaimed (verses 43-45)**

Lastly, we come to verses 43-45 which may seem somewhat confusing at first. We might think that Jesus would want to publicize this amazing miracle so that more and more people could know of His amazing powers. But instead, “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.’” Jesus *did not* want the man to broadcast this miracle to the people. Jesus *did* want him to go and show himself to the priest. According to the instructions concerning leprosy in Leviticus 13-14 the priest had to oversee the ceremonial cleansing of a person who had recovered from leprosy. Jesus wants the leper to go and follow these instructions. But Jesus does not want the man to go out and talk about this freely or spread the news of what has happened.

We’ve encountered this secrecy motif already in verse 25 and 34 when Jesus silenced demons. But this is the first time Jesus seeks to silence a person who has been healed. It will happen again. For instance, when He raises Jairus’s daughter from the dead in 5:43, “he strictly charged them that no only should know this.” These orders seem counterintuitive.

But I think there are two clues here in our passage in Mark 1 that help us understand why Jesus said this to the leper. First of all, in His instruction for the man to go to the priest, the purpose is that it would be “a proof to them” (end of verse 44, “for a proof to them”). That is, the undeniable and miraculous healing of this leper would serve as a testimony to the priests that Jesus has real power and authority. The Greek word here is *marturion*—it’s a testimony, a witness. Jesus wants the religious leaders to know of His power. This foreshadows the conflicts Jesus is going to have with the religious leaders, who will hate Him and put Him to death even though they know of His supernatural power. Jesus has a particular purpose in mind for this leper who is now cleansed. He wants this miracle to be a testimony to the priests.

The second clue we have in these verses has to do with what Jesus is trying to minimize, and that is the mob mentality that surrounds His healing ministry. We see this in verse 45 in the man’s disobedience and the burden that placed on Jesus. “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, of course, Jesus knew this was going to happen. He was not caught of guard by this. It’s not as though His plans were ultimately frustrated in any way. But we do see here that the disobedience of this man contributed to the difficulty of Jesus’

ministry. Jesus had just relieved a huge burden from the leper. But now the leper places a huge burden upon Jesus by disregarding His instructions. Jesus had desired to go from town to town in order to preach, as He told the disciples in verse 38. But now He could no longer openly enter a town.

Remember that the healing ministry was subordinate to the preaching and teaching ministry. It was the preaching that was ultimate. The miracles were penultimate. The proclamation of the Gospel was primary. Healing and casting out demons was secondary. That's what we saw last week when Simon and the others were looking for Jesus when Jesus had gone out to pray. And they said, "Everyone is looking for you." As if to say, Come on back and heal some more people! Do some more miracles! But that was not Jesus' primary purpose. He said, rather, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out" (verse 38). The miraculous displays of His authority were meant to give credence to His preaching. But the miracles were not the main thing. And that's why, on this occasion, it would have been better for this man to keep his mouth shut and go directly to the priests as Jesus told him. But instead the man disobeys and the result is that Jesus has to remain out in desolate places, with people coming out to Him from every quarter.

### **Jesus Trades Places with the Leper**

The interesting thing here is that at the end of these verses Jesus finds himself where the leper had been at the beginning of the story. In verse 40 the leper was the outcast, the one who had to dwell in the desolate places. But now Jesus has healed the leper and then effectively traded places with him. Jesus is now the outcast. Jesus is now the One in the desolate places, while the leper has been cleansed and reintroduced into society.

This is quite a picture of what Christ has accomplished for all of us who are trusting in Him. This is the miracle of salvation, that Jesus trades places with us. He is the Servant of the Lord described in Isaiah 53 who makes many to be accounted righteous and bears their iniquities (verse 11). He was numbered with the transgressors (verse 12). And as 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, God made Christ "to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus trades places with us. He takes our sin, and we receive His righteousness. He is forsaken on the cross. We are received by the Father. And this happens for those who heed the preaching of Jesus to repent of sin and believe in the gospel. We are all lepers at heart. For those who recognize that leprosy and despise it, and cry out to Jesus for help, He will trade places with us. Our sin will be placed on Him, and His righteousness will be placed on us.

John MacArthur draws out this point in the text. He says, “We are the spiritual lepers who lived in alienation and isolation from God. We met Him, we were brought into the presence of God in the Kingdom. 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 because Jesus was forsaken, because Jesus was treated as an outcast we are accepted and welcomed into the presence of God.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning let's marvel at the amazing authority of Jesus to cleanse a leper, and let's marvel at the spiritual truths that come across in this event. Jesus touches the untouchable, and so should we. Physical leprosy is not nearly as dangerous as spiritual leprosy, and therefore we should cry out to Jesus to change our hearts. And lastly we should praise Jesus that He has traded places with us.

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon by John MarArthur, “Jesus Trades Places with a Leper” (Mark 1:40-45). Audio or manuscript can be found at [www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org)