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He Touched Me!

If all the compassions of all the tender fathers in the world were compared with the tender mercies of God they would be but as a candle to the sun or a drop to the ocean.

—Matthew Henry

Read: Luke 5:12-14

The Physician's Eye

Immediately after selecting His first disciples, Luke records that Jesus encountered a leper. In biblical times, the term “leprosy” covered a variety of skin-related diseases, some temporal and some chronic, with certain severe forms becoming progressively debilitating over time.¹ When physician Luke informs us with his medically trained eye that this leper was covered with leprosy (the only Gospel writer who provides us this detail), he is informing us with this Jewish idiom that this particular leper is a very severe case.² Ever wonder why the Holy Spirit prompted Luke to position this encounter immediately after the calling of the first disciples?



A Double Judgment

From the perspective of observant Judaism, being a leper in the first century constituted both a physical and a moral judgment from God.³ There were rabbis who taught that there were only two conditions by which you could not reason that God was disciplining you because He loved you – leprosy and childlessness⁴ (think of Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke 1). Thus, if God doesn't like you, so they reasoned, we are certainly not going to like you either! One rabbi proudly taught that he always carried stones in the pocket of his tunic so he could throw them at any leper he saw to force him or her to flee.⁵ Because of such teaching, rabbis and lepers were like oil and water. No leper ever wanted to get near a rabbi, let alone approach one.

While it is true that there are Old Testament provisions and prohibitions regarding lepers in Leviticus requiring separation of lepers from

the community for health reasons,⁶ God did not intend that separation to also be a moral judgment on lepers. The condemnation of lepers was the creation of Pharisaism, which put it at cross-purposes with God's heart of mercy and compassion for the unfortunate.

The Leper's Protocol

Lepers not only were condemned sinners but were also required to loudly declare themselves "unclean, unclean" whenever non-lepers were nearby.⁷ This was to avoid any inadvertent contact since this disease was assumed to be communicable by contact. As part of this contamination concern, there was a six-foot prohibition,⁸ more if the wind was blowing toward you, which meant that if any non-leprous person got within six (plus) feet of a leper (depending on the winds), they were considered to be ritually impure. That would mandate the non-leprous person having to go to the purification baths to be "cleansed." Obviously no one in his or her right mind would ever deliberately touch a leper.

Lepers were also forbidden from going to the Temple.⁹ In this culture by not going to the Temple and participating in the required sacrifices and offerings there, one could not become "right with God." Thus, a leper could never get right with God and, as a result, had no hope. What must it have been like for a leper to walk around every day feeling in his soul that God does not like him and, furthermore, being convinced there was nothing he could do about it? He was considered to be the "living dead"¹⁰ in the eyes of this merciless and condemning religious culture and thus was expected to exhibit the countenance of a mourner.

The humiliation of being a leper never ended. The religious system of Jesus' day also

mandated that a leper could never wash his or her face (another constant reminder that you are always unclean). Furthermore, a leper was required to always hold a cloth under his or her nose to cover the bottom part of the face.¹¹ The painful reality was that lepers were abandoned, anonymous, faceless people condemned to live under perpetual rejection by a heartless religious culture. The tragedy of this religious reality was that it was being done to honor God! Another reason Jesus had to come!

Remember Naaman?

As further context for this encounter, Luke told us in chapter three that when Jesus returned to Nazareth one Sabbath, He read from the Isaiah scroll as part of His "Rescue Manifesto."¹² Right after reading that passage, Jesus reminded His Nazareth audience of Naaman the hated Gentile Syrian general whom Elisha healed from his leprosy.¹³ In harkening back to this healing of Naaman,¹⁴ Jesus set the stage (in part) for His upcoming encounter with this leper. Since some rabbis taught that the healing of a leper was as difficult as bringing someone back from the dead, the healing of lepers was viewed as an extraordinary miracle from God and one of the sure signs that the Messianic Age had arrived.¹⁵

A Very Different Rabbi

With all this as a contextual backdrop, it is remarkable that this leper even wants to approach Rabbi Jesus. After all, rabbis were considered to be the nemesis of a leper. Somehow, this leper concluded that Rabbi Jesus (*Yeshua*) was a very different (and therefore approachable) rabbi. How might he have come to that conclusion? From more than six feet away, He most likely overheard people talk about Jesus in the marketplace or on the highways and byways of the Galilean district. That kind of overhearing is a

very effective way to spread the Good News to desperate people!

The Leper's "Faith"

As this leper and Jesus approach each other, the leper prostrates himself before Jesus. That is what Simon Peter also did in the preceding encounter after the great catch of fish, seemingly a sign of recognizing deity. Does this leper recognize the deity in Jesus? Not sure. But one thing is sure, he would never pass an Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed exam. Like everyone who comes to Jesus in the Gospels, he does not fully comprehend who Jesus is. Yet one thing he seems to be convinced about: Jesus has the power to make a difference in his life – *you can make me clean*. Therein rests his "faith." And that is enough faith for Jesus. That conviction is what this leper draws upon to steel his courage to try to confront this rabbi, even if it means defying the social/religious prohibition of getting within six feet of a non-leprous person.

Make Me Clean

Note the leper's request to be cleansed, not healed as he prostrates himself before Jesus. Admittedly healing and cleansing travel closely together in this culture, but it is the moral judgment aspect of his disease that he brings to Jesus. What would walking around for years declaring yourself "unclean, unclean" do to a person's psyche and soul? What is it like to live day after day with absolutely no hope of ever getting right with God? After years of declaring himself "unclean, unclean" (being seen as morally filthy in the eyes of observant Judaism), might there have been a deep and desperate longing within this leper's soul for a day when he could somehow be clean. A day when he could wash his face, throw the facial cloth away, go to Temple and get right with God and be "clean" for the rest of his days?

Can You Believe This?

In response to this leper's brazen (and desperate) request, Jesus does the unthinkable – He touches the leper and in so doing brings God's intended compassion and mercy to bear saying *I am willing, be cleansed*. The six-foot no-encroachment zone has been breached. Furthermore, it has been intentionally breached. Jesus' newly chosen disciples cannot believe what has just happened. You just don't touch lepers! Everybody knows that! And He even did it deliberately! And then it should have been quickly apparent that the leprosy was now gone from the leper. Where did the leprosy go? Oh no, might Jesus now have leprosy? What a tragic end that would be to a remarkable ministry just getting started. Such cognitive dissonance might well have flooded these new disciples' hearts and minds as they viewed this paradigm-pulverizing scene in their shock therapy, new-disciples-in-training state.

An Assignment

Having just miraculously healed this new ex-leper, Jesus gives him his next task - go to the Temple and present yourself to the priests. Get certified as "clean" so you can once again 1) be restored to fellowship in your community, 2) participate in Temple worship and liturgy, and by implication 3) deliver a message to Temple Leadership that people covered with leprosy are being healed. The Messianic Age has come!

Rescue and Restoration

Note that with Jesus, healing is always a tactic; complete restoration is always the objective. Jesus not only wants to set this leper free from the physical malady that has debilitated him, but also wants him to be free from the moral and spiritual judgment that has been wrongfully projected on him. And so He commands him to go straight to the Temple to be inspected by the priests to be

certified by the religious “establishment” to be free of this physically and socially debilitating disease. This insight can help shape the way we pray for others. Pray not just for the immediacy of healing in others, but for the total restoration of that person in all aspects of his or her life as well.

First Things First

At this point, it may be helpful for Western evangelicals to reflect on what Jesus did not do after choosing these first disciples. There is no evidence from Luke’s record that Jesus gave them a comprehensive lecture series about why they should now suddenly change their thinking about everything their religious culture has taught them to be “right” and “true” about lepers. Nor did He take them off on a weekend retreat to teach them three principles of why they should now love lepers. In Jesus’ consummate wisdom, He knew He could teach every day for three years, “You disciples need to love lepers,” but even then they would not wake up one morning and beg Jesus, “Please, can we touch lepers today?”

Do and Teach

From Luke’s perspective, Jesus’ discipling strategy was “do and teach” (Acts 1:1), not a “teach and maybe do” approach. The difference in sequence is profound! We so often see the “teach and maybe do” strategy pragmatically lived out in the West where we tend to teach too much and do (experience) too little. For this kind of loving-lepers paradigm shift, Jesus knew these initial disciples first needed a radical behavioral experience to start to smash their entrenched religious paradigms before any teaching could start to effectively sink in. So He gave them no choice in the matter with His watch-Me-touch-a-leper-we’ll-talk-about-it-later discipling boot

camp approach. Western evangelicalism still has much to learn from Jesus’ “do and teach” discipling pedagogy.

What’s Going On Here?

What’s been happening in the short span of these four verses? For starters, Jesus is

- **Rescuing and restoring prisoners** and inviting them into the Kingdom of God. His name is *Yeshua*, the Semitic meaning of which is *the Lord Rescues*. Jesus is implementing the “Rescue Manifesto”¹⁶ that He announced to His family and friends that Sabbath morning in Nazareth.
- **Restoring God’s mercy and compassion** to those who have been deprived of it and for whom God always intended to be its recipients.
- **Redefining purity** from God’s perspective. The ritual purity system of Jesus’ day decreed that when an unclean person touches a clean person, the clean person becomes unclean. Jesus inverts all of that by showing that when the Perfectly Clean touches an unclean person, the unclean person becomes clean and the Divine stays clean.
- **Remaking His disciples** by “do and teach” shock therapy. Disciples are those people who are having all their religious and cultural paradigms torn down, pulverized and deconstructed so they can more fully see, understand and then radically embrace the compassionate nature of the Kingdom of God.
- **Readying the cross** by pointing ahead to what will happen at Calvary. It is there that Jesus will take upon Himself all the sin of people who are likewise the “living dead” *covered* with a leprous condition brought on by issues of guilt, shame and moral judgment, leaving

them eternally cleansed as He absorbs the infinite wrath of God for them and dies in their place.

We Were Lepers Too!

It is important to identify with this leper. We need to see him as the prototypical person – he is us. We too were once the “living dead” on our inevitable way to becoming the “dead dead.” In our blindness and deafness we could not discern that is who we were from a Holy Heaven’s perspective. And then one day we too met Jesus on the pathway of our life and He reached out and touched us. In that moment, we too became cleansed in the eyes of His Father as we were set free from the judgment of the debilitating sin that had so covered us and weighed us down. As a result, we too can now joyfully proclaim, “He touched me! Praise God Almighty, now I am clean!”

It’s About God

The Bible is always revealing to us who God is and how He does things. We learn in this passage that

- God is unpredictable and uncontrollable (by His disciples).
- He responds to those who want to be clean and who seek Him out to be cleansed.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- Is your heart aligned with God’s heart? Does your heart beat in a harmonic way with His? Where does your will and your way need to be realigned/remade/pulverized to be more like His?

- God’s heart is full to overflowing with mercy and compassion to those who have been marginalized.
- One of His ways of (re)making disciples is to radically confront those paradigms that need to be changed so that they can be freed up to embrace God’s Kingdom way of doing things. Note He does not give His disciples any choice in the matter. He knows it has to be done and, given their inclinations, they would never address it.
- Jehovah is personal even to His touch and His touch is sufficient!

It’s About Rescue and Restoration

As regards God’s Plan of Rescue and Restoration, note that

- It is centered in the person and power of Jesus Christ.
- It involves communicating the “Good News” of Jesus Christ to those around us.
- It starts with rescue (healing) but always ends in total restoration.
- God uses disciples in His Plan, but first they need to be remade – have their faulty paradigms completely stripped away. “**Do and Teach**” is a very effective and biblical way to remake disciples.

48 • Encounters with Jesus

- How is your Gratitude Index these days? Are you still thrilled and overwhelmed that one day Jesus entered your life by touching you and setting you free?

- Do you still see yourself as an ex-leper? Or are you still laboring under the misconception that somehow God is indeed fortunate to have you in His Kingdom?

- Are you being overheard in the marketplace? Are you talking about Jesus or about things that never seem to point to Him at all?

- Where do you still need to be touched today? Is there some area of your life, what the Puritans called our “besetting sin,” that is still causing you to slowly die in that part of your life? Bring that to Jesus and let Him touch you there so that you can be completely, not just partially free to live for Him.

- Who are the lepers in our world today? That is a corporate question and begs the question of what are we doing either for them or to them? Are we being helpful or are we being a benign hindrance?
- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

Who are the lepers in your world today? That's a personal question. In your sphere of influence, I would guess there are a significant number of lepers. Most of them are inadvertent lepers – "lepers" you are not even thinking about. A personal example:

When our 13-year old daughter was running out the door of our house in Maryland one Saturday morning for seemingly her 100th birthday party, my wife and I suddenly looked at each other with tears in our eyes and realized that no one had ever invited our 15-year-old son David with special needs (cerebral palsy, autism, delayed mental development) to anyone's birthday party. And we were living in a wonderful community of faith. It wasn't that people were being deliberately non-inclusive, it's just that they were not thinking in a wide-angle inclusive way that brought our son David to mind when it came to birthday parties for their children. In a certain sense, David was invisible to their way of thinking and seeing things. It's that kind of out-of-sight-out-of-mind glaucoma that gives rise to a challenging question: Are we creating defacto social lepers just because we don't view the world with the same inclusive and compassionate eyes like our Father does?

How would God have you be a part of touching one of those "lepers" in your life this week with His mercy and compassion? Who do you know that needs to be rescued and restored, and what might your role be as God's ambassador bringing His compassionate touch into these people's lives?

In the days ahead, set aside some time in solitude and silence to ponder this encounter with a leper. Be sure to put yourself in this scene because it will cause you to savor our Savior yet again. Let this scene both stir and soothe your soul as you let it speak to you as well as touch you in fresh and new ways.

*Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace,
so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

—Hebrews 4:16

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

—Matthew 23:23

Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us.

—C. S. Lewis

As there is no mercy too great for God to give, so there is no mercy too little for us to crave.

—Thomas Brooks

God's reasons of mercy are all drawn from Himself, not from anything in us.

—Matthew Henry

Mercy may seem slow, but it is sure. The Lord in unfailing wisdom has appointed a time for the outgoings of his gracious power, and God's time is the best time.

—C. H. Spurgeon

God has two sheepdogs: Goodness and Mercy. He sends them to us from his throne of grace, sometimes to bark at us, to badger us; sometimes to woo us by persuading us that his will is good and perfect for our lives.

—Sinclair Ferguson

Sources and Notes

¹Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1992), p. 782.

²*The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), p. 1934.

³Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (MacDonald Publishing: undated), p. 225.

⁴Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 226.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Leviticus 13

⁷Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 226.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 225.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Leviticus 13:45

¹²E. Stanley Jones uses this phrase in his book *The Word Became Flesh* (Abingdon: Nashville, Tennessee, 1963).

¹³Luke 4:27

¹⁴II Kings 5

¹⁵Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 463.

¹⁶Luke 4:16-30