

The touch of Jesus is powerful. And lifechanging. One of the most vivid examples in Scripture is the story of the leper in Mark 1.

Mark is the gospel of action. Instead of taking time to tell us about Jesus' birth and childhood, Mark begins his biography at full-speed, tracing the public ministry of Jesus. In chapter one, Mark records Jesus' baptism and temptation, the calling of His disciples, and tells us about his teaching and healing ministry.

We're told that Jesus cast out a demon from a man in the synagogue (25), and then proceeded to heal Peter's mother-in-law (31). Later that day after sunset, the whole town came to Jesus, and He healed many of diseases and set others free from demon-control.

The next morning, Jesus got up early and headed for a solitary place to pray (35). When the disciples discovered He was gone, they frantically searched for Him to tell Him, "Everyone is looking for you! (37)" Only to hear Him say, "Let's go someone else, so I can preach there, too (38)."

That's what He did, according to verse 39. He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching, driving out demons, and changing lives with His touch.

Perhaps no incident illustrates the power of Jesus' touch more vividly than the leper in Mark 1:40. Out of all the people Jesus healed in Galilee, Mark chooses an encounter with a leper as representative of the unique ministry of Jesus.

My friends, know this. Jesus specializes in changing lives by His touch. In a few moments we're going to see evidence of the power of Jesus' touch as we witness baptism. But first, I want us to see from the Word of God what the power of Jesus' touch can do.

Listen to the story. Verse 40, "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'" Matthew's gospel tells us this incident happened right after Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. As He came down off the mountain, who should He meet but a *leper*.

A leper. In Israel, lepers were considered unclean in the community and before God. They were people under a curse. Leprosy was the most dreaded disease of all. Technically, this skin disease is Hansen's Disease. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that lepers were treated "as if they were, in effect, dead men." Sadly, the fear of leprosy was based on ignorance, for physicians like Dr. Paul Brand have proven that the disease is not highly contagious as once thought.

Can you imagine how the leper must have felt? In the time of Jesus, a leper was barred from all walled towns. It was illegal to greet a leper in public. No one was allowed to come nearer to a leper than four cubits--that's six feet. If the wind was blowing towards a person, the leper must stand at least 100 cubits away. One Rabbi would not even eat an egg bought in a street where a leper had passed by. Another Rabbi actually boasted that he flung stones at lepers to keep them away.

Mark says a leper came to Jesus. That in itself is amazing. Lepers were not supposed to come to anyone. They were outcasts, ostracised from society. Yet here was a man compelled to come to Jesus. Forgetting the stares, the looks, the fear, he came to Jesus.

He'd heard of what Jesus had done for others. "What about me?" he must have wondered. Every time he lifted his nubs where fingers had once been, every time he saw the reflection of his disfigured face when he drank from a cup, he was reminded just how pitiful his condition was. Yes, he had to come to Jesus. No matter what anyone thought or said.

We can hardly imagine how dismal this man's life had been. Leviticus 13 tells us that a leper had to wear torn clothes, leave his hair unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out "Unclean! Unclean!"¹

Think how you would feel. Every time you took a walk and met someone, you would have to move to the other side of the street, moaning, "Unclean! Unclean!" You would be gripped with a sense of worthlessness and despair.

As the leper approached Jesus, the crowd no doubt scattered, fearing contamination. Can't you just hear them mumbling as they stepped back, "Who does that miserable wretch think he is?!"

This story is for us. Mark included it to show us how unique the touch of Jesus really is. There are two things that must happen to us if we are to experience the power of Jesus' touch, both of which occurred in the leper's life.

1. To experience Jesus' touch, we need a correct view of ourselves.

The leper was not to be detoured. He had no illusion about his miserable condition. He came to Jesus, fell on his knees before the Savior (40), and begged Him, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

This man knew he was unclean. If he ever doubted that, all he had to do was hold his deformed hand before his face. The facts screamed at him, "I'm unclean! And I can't do anything about it!"

This leper was desperate. He was also in the perfect place to receive God's grace.

The truth is, we are just like the leper. The truth of the leper's story is that we are all spiritual lepers. But unlike the leper we are often unconscious of our sin. We don't realize that sin lies at the heart of who we are, and that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves clean. Indeed, the more we try to convince ourselves that there's nothing wrong, the more advanced our spiritual leprosy is.

As Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great preacher in London's Westminster Chapel often stressed, without a profound sense of sin... "you are not a Christian, you do not believe in Christ as your personal Savior. Until you realize [the gravity of your sin], you cannot possibly feel the need of Christ. You may have felt the need of help and advice and comfort, but until you awake to the fact that your nature itself is evil--until you realize that your trouble is that you yourself are wrong, and that your whole nature is wrong...you will never have felt the need of a Savior. Christ cannot help or advise or comfort you until He has first of all saved you, until He has changed your nature."

Lloyd-Jones continues, "Oh, my friends, have you yet felt this? God have mercy on you if you haven't. You may have been inside the church all your life and actively engaged in its work, but still I say (and I am merely repeating what is said repeatedly in the Bible) that unless you have at some time or other felt that your very nature itself is

¹Kent Hughes, *The Saviour*, p. 24.

sinful--that you are, in the words of St. Paul, 'dead in sin'--then you have never known Jesus Christ as a Savior, and if you do not know Him as a Savior you do not know Him at all."

Don't miss this. Jesus doesn't come to the self-sufficient, to people who think they have no need, who think they can make it on their own. He comes to the broken in spirit, to those who mourn, to those who are willing to cry out, "Unclean! Unclean! I am spiritually unclean!"

Before we can experience Jesus' touch, we need a correct view of ourselves. The sad truth is, many people do not come to Jesus because they've believed one of two opposite lies from Satan. One lie is that we really aren't sinners, or if we are, we'll still "good enough" to make it. The other lie that keeps people from Jesus is that they're *too* sinful, too far gone for Jesus' help. Both wretched lies come from the pit.

The truth is, to experience Jesus' touch, we need a correct view of ourselves. Do you agree with what the Bible says about you?

2. To experience Jesus' touch, we need a correct view of Jesus.

Like the leper possessed. Listen to his words to Jesus (40), "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Notice the leper didn't *ask* Jesus. He merely stated what he believed--*If you are willing, you can do for me what I can't do for myself. You can make me clean.*

There's a model of the two ingredients of faith. Faith is *humble*--"If you are willing." Faith doesn't demand help as a right. We have no right to Jesus' help. But faith is also *confident*--"You can make me clean!" Faith is no mere abstract belief in God. It is specific trust in Jesus, and in His ability to help.

I love what happened next. Mark write (41), "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured."

Filled with compassion! Jesus was moved emotionally by the plight of the leper. Jesus did more than understand. He *felt* the agony of this man. And beloved, when the Savior went to the Cross, He *felt* the crushing weight of our sins.

And then, Mark says, Jesus *touched* the leper. Do you grasp the significance of that touch? When was the last time this man had been touched? Five years? Fifteen years? We're not told. Maybe he was a father who once knew the embrace of his wife and children, but hadn't felt the warmth of human touch in years.

Until Jesus touched him. Jesus didn't need to touch him. He could have healed him by merely speaking a word (that's the way Elisha healed the leper, Naaman, in 2 Kings 5). The fact is, according to Jewish ceremonial law, by touching the leper, Jesus made Himself ceremonially unclean. Not to mention the fact that He was now contaminated with the dreaded disease.

Why then did Jesus him? To show His love, yes, but more than that. To enable the leper to *feel* His love, yes, but still more. With that touch, Jesus illustrates His purpose for coming. In the Incarnation, the perfect Son of God took hold of our flesh. He became one of us. He who knew no sin became sin for us. When He died and rose again, He took our sin, and gave us His purity.

Jesus touched the leper. The word indicates more than momentary contact. Literally Jesus "took hold" of the leper. No doubt, the onlookers were shocked. The leper amazed. And then he heard the words worth more to him than gold, "I am willing. Be clean!" And his leprosy was gone!

His toeless feet were instantly whole. His sunken nose was perfect. His leather-like skin was soft as a baby's. Instantly!

Can you hear the man's ecstatic cry? No longer, "Unclean! Unclean!" but "I'm clean! I'm clean!" And it was Jesus' touch that did it!

I'm intrigued by what Jesus did next. He sent the man away with a warning (44), "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest..." Apparently, Jesus didn't want to gain the reputation of being just another miracle-worker.

But the former leper disregarded Jesus' words, and spread the news about Jesus. As a result Jesus' ministry in the towns had to come to a halt. It reminds me that when sinners are touched by Jesus, they're still sinners.

Isn't it ironic that Jesus told this man to keep quiet, but he didn't, yet He commanded us to spread the Word, yet we often don't? And because this man disobeyed, others in his town missed out on Jesus' touch. And the same happens when we disobey.

Beloved, Jesus still touches lives. In a few moments we'll be seeing the testimony of lives who've been changed by His touch. But I would ask you--have you ever felt the life-changing touch of Jesus? Has Jesus ever taken hold of your life?

Would you like to? If so, you need a correct view of yourself. Have you ever cried out to the Savior, "I'm unclean!"? To experience His touch, you must. You must also admit the truth about Jesus, "If You are willing, *You* can make me clean." He can. He alone can. And He will if you will repent and call upon Him right now.