

THE CLEANSING OF THE LEPER

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"Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean" (2005). Leprosy, why did the Lord choose to speak about leprosy? It seems this disease is mentioned often in the Bible; lepers were outcast, considered unclean and were avoided at all costs because the disease was highly contagious. Anyone having a lesion or even a suspicious bump on their skin, was required to see a priest who would then determine if the person was unclean and therefore had to live outside the city walls. The priest could not heal the person or even truly determine if the person had the disease or not. Jesus the high priest can cure leprosy and physical ailments most importantly though he can heal the heart, our hearts. He can forgive our sins, are we not all lepers? Are we not all made unclean by sin?



In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is coming down from the mountain where He had been teaching a large crowd. This crowd was awestruck by His authority and was following Him when He encountered the leper. Matthew, tells us "then a leper approached, did him homage..." We can deduce the leper was not on the mountain and did not hear Jesus' teachings, yet he sees Him and feels compelled to approach Him and do Him homage...one cannot help but wonder what Jesus must have looked like, what His eyes must have conveyed - for an outcast from society, a man who knew he was not welcomed or wanted. This man looked at Jesus and instantly knew love, he did not see rejection or disgust, he saw compassion and mercy, and simply he saw Love. He had just finished telling them, "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man... (2005). We see that He not only tells them, but then shows them. He gives them a concrete example of how to live their lives, how to put the words into action - He shows them. This man, the leper, was moved to reverence Jesus, before presumably saying a word. In his infinite wisdom and love, He confirms His teaching to the crowds. Our own hearts should be able to look at the Eucharist and see this much love, mercy and compassion; we should always do Him homage and ask Him to cleanse us.

Mark tells us that Jesus, "rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed." Prayer is subtly but often mentioned. He prayed then continued on to nearby villages, "preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee" (2005). The Gospel says, "a leper came to him [and kneeling down] begged him..." Again, we see the leper acknowledges Jesus as Savior. Jesus does not say a word to him beforehand, but the leper felt obliged to kneel before Him. Something in Jesus' countenance moved him to beg Him to clean him.

Different from the Gospel of Matthew, after Jesus performs the miracle of cleansing him, he warns him and said to him "see that you tell no one anything..." (2005). We see in the leper, human frailty. He does not obey Jesus; he "went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly" (2005). How many others was Jesus going to cure? How many other miracles could He not perform because this man did not obey? Mankind is often, almost always, an obstacle to the plans of God. In His mercy, He always brings about a good but how much better could and would things be if we simply cooperated with Him? If we, could follow the simplest of instructions? From the beginning man was tricked into believing that he did not need God, that he knew better than God, and from the beginning God in His infinite mercy always accepts what we give Him, good or bad and brings about something better. Ah, but if we worked with Him instead of against Him...

In Luke's account, Jesus encounters the leper after He calls Simon the fisherman. Sitting in Simon's boat he taught the crowds. He sat like a teacher, a person with knowledge and authority and instructed them. However, like the other Gospels the leper approached Him, supposing without a word from Jesus. We could venture to say that in all three the leper was nearby listening to Jesus - but we know with certainty that he was not in the crowd. The people would have avoided him at all cost for fear that they too might get leprosy.

Luke tells us the leper "fell prostrate, pleaded with him..." then he goes on to say "Jesus stretched out his

hand, touched him..." We do not know how long this man was a leper, we can deduce it was a long time "a man full of leprosy," this disease had and has a long incubation period so it would have taken time for anyone to be visibly "full of leprosy" (2005). A man, who for years had been ignored, avoided, unloved, and untouched. A man regarded as filth, dirty, unclean and cursed by God. Jesus in His kindness, before He heals him, touches him. At that simple touch the man's heart must have leaped with joy, Love touched him and cleaned him.

The Synoptic Gospels all have the cleansing of the leper in common. The leper sees Jesus and tells him, "if you wish you can make me clean" and he replies, "I do will it" (2005). This outcast, this man not only afflicted with the disease but is also a person hurt, ridiculed and avoided by society - this man recognizes him as the Saviour. There were so many that failed to recognize Jesus so many that were blind to His greatness and to His love. Some did see, but were not convinced; they could not believe that this simple man was the Son of God.

Our hearts are dirty, stained by sin, but if we recognize Love, look at Him and allow Him to touch us - we will be cleansed; sometimes the greater the sins the greater the ability to recognize God, His mercy and love. So often we can recognize Him, look at Him but we do not allow Him to touch us. Possibly for fear that we cannot handle so much love or fear of the responsibility of accepting so much love; in each of the Gospels Jesus gives the leper a task after cleansing them. We need only to allow Him, "Lord if you wish you can make me clean...I do will it" (2005).

References

The Holy Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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