

The Gospel According to
Luke

"Healing Is Only Skin Deep"
Chapter 5:12-16

Introduction

"Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

These are familiar words. You've used them many times - modifying the particular request at the end to suit your own situation. You say, "*Lord, if you are willing, you can...*," and then you fill-in the blank with whatever you'd like Jesus to do for you or someone you love.

The leper was immediately cleansed from his leprosy. **We** do not always immediately receive the answer to **our** requests. The diseases and dilemmas and difficulties we ask the Lord to remove often remain. The people we pray for to recover instead die.

The cleansing of this leper gives us insight for those times when the fill-in-the-blank we are praying for remains. We'll see that your healing is secondary to your testimony.

Here is what I mean: Jesus gave the leper clear instructions to go to the priests "**as a testimony to them.**" He instead gave his testimony of the miracle to everyone but the priests. As a result, Jesus' ministry was hindered, not helped, and He withdrew to the wilderness.

I conclude from this story that your testimony has a higher priority than your request for healing. Here is what that means on a practical level:

1. If healing you will produce a testimony that will minister to others, then Jesus is willing to heal you.
2. If not healing you will produce a testimony that will minister to others, then Jesus is willing to not heal you.

Let's take a closer look at our leprous friend. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Jesus Is Willing To Touch You In Your Infirmities, and #2 You Must Be Willing To Testify For Jesus In Your Infirmities.

#1 Jesus Is Willing To Touch You
In Your Infirmities
(v12-13)

The disease which we today call leprosy primarily acts as an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes. Its numbing quality is precisely the reason the destruction and decay of tissue occurs. Without pain as a warning system, people have been known to reach into a charcoal fire to retrieve a piece of food... Or to turn an ankle, tearing the ligaments, but go on walking... Or to wash their face with what turns out to be scalding hot water... All because they are numb to the pain.

Soon the skin in such spots loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy, and scaly ... 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. By a touch of the finger one can also feel it. 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. His throat becomes hoarse, and you can now not only see, feel, and smell the leper, but you can hear his rasping voice. And if you stay with him for some time, you can even imagine a peculiar taste in your mouth, probably due to the odor.

In Bible times, a person suspected of having the disease was taken to a priest for examination. If he showed signs of having more than a superficial skin problem, he was isolated for seven days. If the symptoms became worse, the person was isolated for seven more days. If, at that time the rash had not spread further; the person was

pronounced clean. If, however, the rash had become worse, he was pronounced unclean. When leprosy was immediately evident from a person's hair turning white and his having raw swollen flesh, he was pronounced unclean on the spot and no isolation period was involved. His clothes were to be torn, his head uncovered, his mouth covered (to prevent spread of the disease), and he was to cry, *"Unclean! Unclean!"* wherever he went to warn others to stay clear of him. Lepers were forbidden to live in any community with their fellow Israelites.

Many Jewish teachers proudly adopted a practice of throwing stones at lepers if they saw them approaching. It should astound you, therefore, to read that a leper approached Jesus.

Luke 5:12 And it happened when He was in a certain city, that behold, a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus; and he fell on *his* face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

"Full of leprosy" was Dr. Luke's expert medical observation. This was an advanced and serious case of leprosy. According to Jewish law, the leper should not have approached Jesus; and Jesus should not have received him. Yet neither was violating the spirit of the law – which was to seek the good of all. God's laws and commandments are not meant to be harsh and cruel; we need to embrace the spirit in which they were given and never become harsh and cruel. A lot of Christians treat the unsaved as if they should go around shouting out, *"Unclean! Unclean!"*, and throwing stones at them.

The leper's words, *"Lord, if you are willing,"* could be taken one of two ways:

1. They could indicate a humble submission to God's will for his life, as if to say, *"Lord, if it is your will, cleanse me from leprosy."*
2. Or they could be a challenge to the Lord's compassion, as if to say, *"Lord, how can it be anything other than your will to cleanse me from leprosy."*

We are often torn between these two thoughts. On the one hand, we understand that we must submit to God's will in and for our lives.

But, on the other hand, we have a difficult time accepting His will if He leaves us in our infirmities.

Jesus did something totally unheard of and unexpected:

Luke 5:13 Then He put out *His* hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately the leprosy left him.

You could not help a leper by touching him; but you could harm yourself. Jesus could have healed him from a distance, with a word; but He touched him. It was and is a powerful picture of God’s compassion.

It was also one of those mind-blowing things Jesus loved to do. You see, if you touched a leper, you would be considered unclean until you went through a religious ceremony of ritual cleansing. Jesus was not unclean, however, because the moment He touched the leper, *the leper wasn’t a leper anymore!*

The leper pictures the entire human race as seen by God, as seen from a heavenly perspective. If you were in heaven, the true spiritual condition of men and women would look like leprosy. Leprosy was called a “walking death.” The Bible says human beings are born “*dead in trespasses and sin,*” *the walking dead*. Like leprosy, sin infects the whole person, and it is ugly, loathsome, corrupting, contaminating, alienating, and incurable by man. Jesus came, took upon Himself a human body, in order to cleanse you from sin. He takes upon Himself your spiritual leprosy without becoming defiled; He gives you His spiritual health.

This brief but moving episode establishes that Jesus is willing to touch **you** in your infirmities. He came as God in human flesh to touch the entire human race; He offers salvation to whosoever will believe in Him. After you are saved, He can touch you anytime you find yourself in **any** infirmity or adversity. He is full of compassion.

So why do the diseases and dilemmas and difficulties we ask the Lord to remove often remain? Why do the people we pray for die?

Remember: The point and emphasis of this story is not the healing, but the testimony Jesus intended.

#2 You Must Be Willing To Testify For Jesus In Your Infirmities (v14-16)

Jesus told the cleansed leper to give a very specific testimony of his infirmity:

Luke 5:14 And He charged him to tell no one, “But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony to them, just as Moses commanded.”

The Old Testament book of Leviticus described an elaborate ceremony by which a leper was declared cleansed. It involved taking two birds; one was put in a clay pot and killed over running water. The former leper was then sprinkled seven times and pronounced clean by the priest, and the live bird was dipped in the blood of the slain bird and then was set free. The cleansed person was then to wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and bathe himself. He could then rejoin Israelite society, although he had to remain outside his tent for seven days. The final act on the eighth day was to bring the required guilt, sin, and grain offerings and to be anointed by the priest on various parts of the body – the ear, thumb, and toe.

All of these were symbolic, prefiguring the person and work of Jesus Christ. The birds were most likely doves. One represents the death of Jesus; the other, His resurrection.

1. Birds don't belong in clay pots. They belong in the heavens above. Jesus belonged in heaven, but put Himself into a clay pot – an earthen vessel, a body of flesh and blood - in order to be the sacrifice required for the cleansing of our sins.
2. The running water pictures the ministry of God the Holy Spirit. Jesus (we're told) “**offered Himself through the eternal spirit**” (Hebrews 9:14).
3. The blood-stained bird turned loose is Jesus rising from the dead in His resurrection and ascending into heaven in victory over sin and death.

4. The blood also had to be applied to the leper. Without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sins (Hebrews 9:22).
5. How did a leper know he was clean? *The priest declared him clean!* **We** are declared clean – we are declared righteous; justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

There's a lot of other symbolism, but you get the idea. Something much greater than the healing was happening. Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament law in a way never seen before that would establish Him as the promised and prophesied Messiah.

Great... ***Except the cleansed leper failed to give his testimony to the priests!***

Luke 5:15 However, the report went around concerning Him all the more; and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities.

It was a very sad “*however.*” Not only did the leper disregard Jesus; you cannot escape the fact that what he did had the effect of hindering Jesus from ministering to others. Instead of teaching in their synagogues, Jesus had to hide out in the wilderness – where He was hounded by those seeking healings.

You and I might cut this guy some slack because of the tremendous thing that had occurred. Of course he wanted to tell everyone! But, in doing so, he limited the effect of his healing. Had the priests been challenged to perform the ritual, they would have been forced to give official, confirmed, recorded testimony that Jesus was fulfilling the law and had power to heal.

Your testimony is important – more important than the healing.

Jesus was severely limited:

Luke 5:16 So He Himself *often* withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

The language is even stronger when you read this same account in the Gospel of Mark:

Mark 1:45 However, he went out and began to proclaim *it* freely, and to spread the matter, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction.

Jesus was forced to withdraw because the multitudes were seeking Him out for healings. Sure, their healings were a testimony; but they were *not* the powerful, officially confirmed testimony Jesus wanted.

The Lord's greatest purpose is to cleanse you from sin, *not* sickness. His physical healings were often intended to be illustrations of the deeper spiritual work. In just a few verses Jesus will be confronted by a paralyzed man. He will say to the man, "**Your sins are forgiven!**" He put the priority on the spiritual healing. Then, as the religious leaders were contemplating whether Jesus was blaspheming God, He said,

Luke 5:23 "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise up and walk'?"

Luke 5:24 But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" - He said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."

1. The leper was physically healed, then told to give a specific testimony that would reveal a deeper, spiritual healing.
2. The paralytic was spiritually healed; he was allowed to remain in his physical infirmity (if only for a short time) before he was physically healed.

It's your testimony that matters; it's the deeper, spiritual work that ministers to others. Let me say this with respect to any suffering you may be enduring: It is easy for Jesus to heal you of your infirmities or help you out of your adversities. But if He does, it may or may not produce the proper testimony to minister to others.

Let me put it another way: Do you want to help, or to hinder, the work of the Lord in reaching others? We've seen that the cleansing of the leper had the effect of hindering Jesus.

If you are not healed of your infirmities; if you are not helped out of your adversities; then it is God's desire to help you through them. He

touches you spiritually. You receive His grace and mercy; you can experience His peace; you can bear the fruit of His Spirit. All spiritual blessings in heavenly places are yours to enjoy as you are called upon to endure infirmity and adversity.

God heals; God helps. He is willing; He can do anything you ask that is consistent with His nature and character.

You must be willing to testify for Jesus in your infirmities, in your adversities. It is often a greater testimony to others that you share the sufferings of Jesus than having them removed.

Conclusion

In the ceremony to recognize the cleansing of a leper, on the eighth and final day something dramatic happened. The priest would take the blood of a lamb that had been sacrificed and smear it on your right ear, your right thumb, and your right toe. He then coated each smear with an anointing of oil. Finally, he would pour the rest of the oil on the head of the cleansed leper.

It's a picture of your life with the Lord:

1. He was the lamb slain for you on Calvary. His blood is not literally placed on your ear; but because of it you can hear God. His blood is not literally placed on your thumb; but because of it you can serve God. His blood is not literally placed on your toe; but because of it you can walk with God.
2. The oil is always a symbol of the Holy Spirit. He is poured-out into and onto your life as the power in which you hear and serve and walk with God.

The Lord is willing and He can do whatever you ask. You must be willing to subordinate what you ask to His will – trusting Him to produce the testimony that will bring Him the most glory and reach the most people.