

9. Jesus Heals Leprosy and Paralysis.

Luke 5:12-26

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

Warm-up: Have you ever been sick, injured, or laid up in bed and had other people care for you? If so, how did this experience affect you?

In our study today, we will look at two instances of the healing ministry of the Lord Jesus, e.g. not only Jesus' healing a leprous man but also a man who was paralyzed. Before we look at the leper, let's understand what it was like to be afflicted with leprosy.

The Condition of Leprosy

There were two kinds of leprosy in Jesus' day, commentator William Barclay tells us. "There was one which was rather like a very bad skin disease, and it was the less serious of the two. There was the other in which the disease started from a small spot and ate away the flesh until the wretched sufferer was left with only the stump of a hand or a leg. It was literally a living death." Barclay also tells us what it was like to have this kind of leprosy:

It might begin with little nodules which go on to ulcerate. The ulcers develop a foul discharge; the eyebrows fall out; the eyes become staring; the vocal chords become ulcerated, and the voice becomes hoarse, and the breath wheezes. The hands and feet always ulcerate. Slowly the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of that kind of leprosy is nine years, and it ends in mental decay, coma and ultimately death.

Leprosy might begin with the loss of all sensation in some part of the body; the nerve trunks are affected; the muscles waste away; the tendons contract until the hands are like claws. There follows ulceration of the hands and feet. Then comes the progressive loss of fingers and toes, until in the end a whole hand or a whole foot may drop off. The duration of that kind of leprosy is anything from twenty to thirty years. It is a kind of terrible progressive death in which a man dies by inches.¹

Doctor Luke (remember Luke was a doctor of medicine) tells us in verse 12 that this man was covered with leprosy. Surely, this is the worse kind of leprosy. The Book of Leviticus gave very specific instructions about various skin diseases, leprosy being one of them.

The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp (Leviticus 13:45-46).

Lepers could not live inside the town. Obviously, that meant that they could not go to synagogue or the Jerusalem Temple. They were outcasts of society. People would stone them if they got too

¹ William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible: Matthew. Volume 1. Saint Andrew Press 1975, p. 295.

near. Oftentimes, their affliction affected their voice box, and they could not speak properly. If that was the case, then they had to carry a bell everywhere they went so that they could ring a proximity warning. Leprosy was a contagious disease, so not even their families would come near them. It started with a speck on the brow of the head, or on the eyelids, or the palms of the hands. Once started, it weakened muscles, slowly getting worse over time. The leper's skin became mummy – like. It's not uncommon for the victim's lips to hang down exposing the teeth. Leprosy is an anesthetic disease affecting the nerves, which means that those afflicted do not feel pain. There have been reports from India of lepers who had no fingers after rats had been gnawing away at their bones while they slept, with the sufferer not even feeling the devouring of their fingers. One case was of a person who was blinded after he had thrown scalding water on his face, burning his eyes. The scalding water had not been felt by the hands.

Dr. A. B. Macdonald, in an article on the leper colony in Itu, Nigeria, of which he was in charge, wrote, "The leper is sick in mind as well as body. For some reason there is an attitude to leprosy different from the attitude to any other disfiguring disease. It is associated with shame and horror, and carries, in some mysterious way, a sense of guilt, although innocently acquired like most contagious diseases. Shunned and despised frequently, lepers consider taking their own lives and some do." The leper was hated by others until he came to hate himself. Lepers would often be together with other sufferers in order to help one another. That doesn't seem to be the case in this situation. The leper in our passage came to Jesus alone. Somehow, he had heard of Jesus, maybe through a relative that shouted from a distance to him.

What would it be like to live as a leper? How would leprosy affect a person both socially and spiritually?

Jesus and the Leprous Man, 5:12-16

¹²While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." ¹³Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him. ¹⁴Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." ¹⁵Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

The two passages, which we are viewing today, i.e. the leper and the paralyzed man, are examples of people with faith in God. The paralyzed man had four faith-filled friends. We are told that, without faith, it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6). The leper had the faith to go in search of Jesus. The passage tells us that "While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy" (verse 12). This tells us something of the desperation of the leper. He risked being stoned on the way for being in the town. However, for the leper, it was all or nothing. It was evident by his torn clothes and by his face and skin that he was a leper because Luke comments that he "was covered with leprosy." There seems to be a courage born of desperation that brings him to Jesus.

We also see humility on the part of the leper. He casts himself on the ground and, with his face in the dirt, proclaims his words of faith, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Notice that he doesn't say, "Lord, if you are willing, you can heal me." This man is aware that he needs to be *cleansed* of his leprosy. The Lord doesn't come to the self-sufficient, but to those that readily admit their guilt and need of being cleansed within. Too many rest their weight on trying to be good enough; whereas, this man comes to Christ, admitting that he cannot make it on his own. He knew that his healing was in Jesus' hands. He was totally dependent upon what God would do for him out of mercy.

Some people would like to think that they can earn God's favor. They do not realize their own need. It's like the man who complained to his friends as to the exorbitant cost of his sports car insurance. "How can it be so expensive when I have a clean license," he said. When he was challenged as to his clean license, he replied, "Well, it's nearly clean, just a few spots on my record." How can he have a nearly clean license? His record is either clean or it's not! The only way to receive a clean record before God is to come to Him, admitting that you have sinned and that your life is marred and stained by the leprosy of sin. Come to Jesus and be cleansed!

There is no doubt in this leper's heart that Jesus can do this. The last person ever recorded to heal a leper was Elijah when he healed Naaman, the Syrian general (2 Kings 5:1-19), but this leper standing before Jesus has no difficulty or doubt at all about Christ's ability to perform such a healing. His question is more about the Lord's willingness. He knows Jesus to be a holy man, and he is afraid to cause Him to be unclean. According to the Book of Leviticus, to come into contact with a disease, such as the leper had, would demand that anyone would have to wash his clothes and be ceremonially unclean for the rest of the day (Leviticus 15:1-7; 31).

Few people even believed that God would heal leprosy because all that were so afflicted were seen as unclean and under the disfavor of God. I can imagine the crowd near Jesus recoiling with horror when they saw a leper in their midst. Instantly, mothers reached for their children before quickly backing away from him. Would Jesus be angry at such boldness and chutzpah (gall, nerve, bold-faced desperation)? With gasps from the people, Jesus stooped, came down to his level, and put His hand on the man's head, saying, "I am willing, Be clean!" Christ touched him! As He did so, the knobs on his hands grew fingers, his ears instantly healed, the feet grew out before them, and his eyebrows and eyelashes grew out and hair immediately grew on his head. Those who were watching stared in amazement, as their children began asking their parents as to what happened to the man. There was no hesitation in Jesus. He is willing to heal those who come to Him in faith. Would to God that each of us would approach Jesus with an unconquerable faith such as this!

Why did Jesus touch him? With some others, He had healed from a distance (John 4:43-54; Matthew 15:28), why not this time? How do you think the leper felt about being touched? What does a touch communicate to another?

How long had it been since this leper had been touched? I wonder if he was moved in his spirit at the touch of Jesus. Surely, his body was moved to sobs at being touched by the Lord. He felt Jesus' compassion and love! What a sight it must have been to witness the Lord Jesus'

compassion reaching out and touching him. I feel sure we all would have wept to see this untouchable being touched with the love of God.

Compassion is a quality sorely in need today. In the early eighties when AIDS was a new disease, many did not understand, and certainly the doctors early on did not know how it was transmitted. Princess Diana visited people with AIDS and reached out and touched them. I still have the picture in my mind of her doing such a thing. Compassion breeds love and devotion. Diana was not a saint, just an ordinary person who was moved by this terrible disease and the plight of the people who were afflicted by it.

The Word of God tells us, “and immediately the leprosy left him.” Do you think he had new tissue replaced instantly? Did his hand grow out before them? Why would Jesus tell him not to tell anyone but go and show himself to the priest at the temple?

It is possible that Jesus was concerned that the man would not make the seventy-mile journey to Jerusalem to see the priest. It is easy to get sidetracked by people who want to hear the story of what Jesus did, and the man would not be accepted back into society and into the community of the faithful until he had received an all-clean signal from the priest. This cleansing of leprosy was also to be a testimony to the priesthood in Jerusalem that the Messianic Age had begun. It is interesting that Luke begins the next passage by making us aware that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were present to watch His every move from that time on (v. 17).

Jesus Heals a Paralytic, 5:17-26

In our next five passages of Scripture, we are told by Luke of five controversial stories (5:17-26, 27-32, 33-39; 6:1-5, 6-11) that bring Jesus into conflict with the religious leaders and Pharisees. In these passages, we see Jesus as One not accepting the status quo, the existing state of affairs, but challenging the way things are in order for the people of God to see things and people the way God sees them. According to Mark’s parallel account (Mark 2:1), the scene was in Capernaum on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. Mark tells us that Christ was at home there:

¹⁷One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. ¹⁸Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. ²⁰When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." ²¹The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ²²Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? ²³Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?" ²⁴But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ²⁵Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. ²⁶Everyone was amazed

and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today" (Luke 5:17-26).

Luke opens with a statement of the religious critics pursuing Jesus and hoping to find an occasion to discredit Him and find something not lawful in His teaching so that they could proclaim him a false prophet. They came to inspect and dissect every word and every move He made.

Again, we see in this passage an expression of faith born out of desperation, i.e. some men bringing their friend to Jesus. When they got to the house where Jesus was, they were disappointed at the huge crowds gathered around the house and straining to get near enough to even hear what Jesus was teaching through the doors or windows. A parallel passage in Mark 2:1-12 adds to our attention that there were four friends carrying the paralyzed man on a pallet. Love for their friend and desperation evolved into a plan to go up the outside steps to the roof and break open the roof tiles and lower their friend down before Jesus. During the heat of the summer in the Middle East, people would often sleep on the flat roofs where they would get a breeze that would be refreshing.

Verse 17 says, "The power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick." Why would Luke draw our attention to that? Isn't the power of the Lord always there to heal the sick?

There are times during congregational meetings when there is a special anointing, call it what you will. I prefer to think of the anointing as a special presence and manifestation of God. In these times, there seems to be a heightened awareness of the presence of God. This state of awareness somehow also raises the expectation to see what God will do.

I can tell you about an occasion that was very similar to this story we have just read in the book of Luke. It happened right in front of my eyes. It occurred not in Jerusalem or in a church, but in someone's living room in my hometown of Dovercourt, Harwich, in Essex, England, where I was helping to lead a small church. We had just returned from a baptism and were having a celebration at someone's house, which was close to the seacoast. Just a few people had been baptized, all of them adults. At that time, we felt that God wanted us to make our baptisms very public occasions in order to be a witness to others in our town. After all, we figured, if baptism was supposed to be a public declaration, then let's really declare it!

This drew the attention of others including the local newspaper reporters. (It was a small town, after all, and this was not something that one would see every day; people going into the cold North Sea fully clothed.) There were about thirty-five to forty people present afterwards at the house where we gathered to celebrate, and it was not a formal meeting. Some people were in a corner with a guitar singing worship songs, some were talking and laughing, and others were just eating together. Tony Tiller, one of the men who had been baptized, had dried off and changed clothes but was experiencing some pain from the cold.

Tony had been a cripple for around fourteen years. He was crippled in a fall from a crane where he worked at the docks at Harwich, Parkestone Quay. His harness had not been strapped correctly, and when it came loose, Tony fell from quite a height from the crane to the hard

dockyard below, jarring his neck and spine. The doctor did not give Tony much hope for recovery, and told him that his mobility would decrease. He had put Tony on a steady regime of strong pain medication.

Due to his injury, we knew that to be baptized in the sea could be very difficult and uncomfortable for him. The North Sea is rarely calm at the best of times, and Tony could only get into the water with the help of one person on either side. He wanted to be baptized in the sea with the rest of the group. After the baptism, we gathered together to enjoy thanking God for His goodness and to pray for those baptized. Tony had wanted to be healed, but he had not asked for prayer for healing up to this point. Roger, our lead pastor at the church, wanted to pray for Tony.

After we had spent a great deal of time just socializing, worshipping and eating, we gathered around Tony, and Roger said a simple prayer. Many at that meeting joined together, extended their hands, and cried out to God in prayer. Then, Tony was asked to do something he normally could not do. Tony bent over, and with some difficulty, untied and took off his shoes, but he said that he could still feel pain. We prayed again. After praying the second time, Roger asked if he felt anything different. Tony seemed to notice that something had changed and felt he wanted to take a step of faith, literally. So, from a standing position, Tony leapt over a stool in front of him. He then started running down the hallway, jumping up and touching the ceiling. He was shouting his thanks to God. It was an incredible and instantaneous healing. Everyone in the room was in tears, among them, Tony's son, Mark, who had never seen his father walk without assistance.

Tony was healed from that day of his spinal injury and was able to return his wheelchair to the doctor, who was astounded at the instantaneous recovery. His doctor stopped prescribing the pain medication because Tony did not need it, but the physician was very confused as to how this happened. Although the doctor did not profess belief, it caused him to question and he admitted that he was amazed at the recovery.

Tony's workmates stopped us at times on the street when they saw us to thank us for healing their friend. This led to opportunities to talk about the One who had healed Tony. The newspaper reporters came and talked to Tony about his experience and ran an article on the front page. The headline was called, "My Healing," and the paper had a picture of his jumping over a three-foot wooden fence. Many years later, Tony was known to be a man that ran everywhere he was going. When I asked him as to why he ran, his reply was that he was catching up on those lost fourteen years.

This healing took us all wonderfully by surprise. God responded to simple faith. None of us had ever witnessed anything that sudden and miraculous in regard to healing before. Later on, thinking on this miracle of healing in front of our eyes, I recalled a very special presence of God in our room that, I think, was a result of the Word of God being preached, an atmosphere of praise in the room, and Tony's faith in God.

God shows up at certain times when faith and worship are expressed. There certainly are times when there is no special presence of God and healing still takes place, but sometimes you can just sense that the presence and power of the Lord is in the room. It may be during a time of worship when people have been lost to themselves and totally focused on the Lord; it may be due

to a faith-filled expectation among those gathered. I like to think of faith as expectation—what are you expecting God to do during a congregational meeting? According to your faith let it be done to you! (Matthew 9:29). It could be a hunger for God that is upon a group or, maybe, a level of faith that is brought about by teaching the Word of God. The Lord loves to be among a body of people that are focused on Him alone.

I wonder how the owner of the house felt when the roof suddenly started crumbling and the faces peered through. Often, people do not know their need or even put words to the fact of their need. We don't know why the man was paralyzed, but it is possible that it was brought about by a sin that he had committed. Physical affliction can come about because of a sin that has been committed and not repented. After King David's sin with Bathsheba, when he tried to keep what he had done from the people, he felt an affliction on his body until he repented and got right with God:

³When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Jesus went straight to the paralyzed man's spiritual need for forgiveness first, and then his physical need of healing. The Lord responded to the man after seeing his friends' faith. The passage says, "Jesus saw *their* faith," not his faith. This should encourage each of us who stand in the gap for our friends. We can touch the heart of our Savior and Healer with our expression of faith for our friends and loved ones.

When Jesus said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven," there was disapproval among the religious crowd hoping to find an occasion against him. One gets the impression that there is muttering and whispering going on in the room after what Jesus says. This is what His critics have been seeking. What gives Him the right to say, "Your sins are forgiven?" Who can forgive sins but God alone? This claim to be able to forgive sins is indeed an astonishing claim. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, puts it well when he writes,

One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give his conduct. Yet, this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the person chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws were broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is

not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivaled by any other character in history.²

Was Christ intimidated by the legalists? What do you see in this passage that tells you He is not? What do you read into verses 21 to 25?

In order to show that He does have power on earth to forgive sins, the Lord proves it by choosing the more difficult option—that of commanding the man to get up, pick up his pallet, and go home. In front of them all, the man responds to the command by lifting up his body to a sitting position and miraculously gets up to gasps and praise by all except the religious men that were watching.

Surely this is an indirect claim to be God. The Father backs up Christ’s statement by healing the man. Healing comes from God, and here we see God backing up Jesus’ statement by life and power flowing through the paralyzed man, making him completely well. How infuriated the “superior” religious crowd must have been and how amazed and delighted the poor and common people were. “Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God.” There was awe in the room. Oh Lord, do the same among us!

It can be easy to miss the challenging nature of Jesus’ actions when He went against the traditional normal stereotypes and expectations of His day. If we were to put these situations in our own present day, I wonder how many times we ourselves would be offended or confused by the actions Jesus may choose to take in our present day as He continues to reach out to those who are despised, rejected, and considered as outcasts? We never want to be on the wrong side of God’s compassion, looking on with disapproval while God is desiring to reach out and touch someone in need of God’s healing and forgiveness.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to see others in the light of Your own love and mercy. Your kindness leads men to repentance. Keep us from legalism and from our own assumptions and keep our hearts and spirits open to You.

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² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; Harper Collins: 2001) 51-52.