

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Miracles of Jesus		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matt. 8:1; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16		
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THE CLEANSING OF THE LEPER

Chronologically, the event we are dealing with follows the famous “Sermon on the Mount.” Other healings (the demoniac at the synagogue, Peter’s mother-in-law, and evening crowds outside Peter’s home) had preceded the cleansing of the leper. What we find then is a movement from the words of Jesus to the deeds of Jesus. The fact that His words are put first may be designed to indicate the relative importance of the two. The words, S. Lewis Johnson points out, “are more important than the deeds.”¹ The point that needs to be understood is that the main purpose behind this solemn procession of miracles is the confirming of the authority with which Jesus had spoken. The miracles are the credentials, the identifying signs that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). “To those who believe that Jesus was what he claimed to be, that is, to those who believe in the Incarnation, there is no difficulty about miracles. They are,” remarks Plummer, “the natural works of a supernatural person.”²

THE TEXT. “. . . a man full of leprosy” (Luke 5:12). Matthew and Mark have simply “a leper.” Luke the physician notes the advanced stage of the disease. The word “full” (Gk. *pleres*) was used in Greek lit. to refer to the manning of a ship, the full crew of a vessel ready for sea.³ Thus the man was in the final stages of the disease.

- I. **LEPROSY AS FOUND IN BIBLICAL TIMES.** The form of leprosy that we encounter in the Bible is most commonly referred to as white leprosy. It prevailed among the Hebrews to an unusual extent. Barclay writes: “It might begin with little modules 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 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.”⁴ The disease runs through the skin to the muscle and into the bone. Keil-Delitzsch writes in further detail: “The hair becomes white and wooly, and at length falls off; hard gelatinous swellings are formed in cellular tissue; the skin gets hard, rough and seamy, lymph exudes from it and forms large scabs, which fall off from time to time, and under these are often offensive running sores. The nails then swell, curl up, and fall off; entropium (introversion of the eyelids) is formed, with bleeding gums, the nose stopped up, and a considerable flow of saliva . . . the senses become dull, the patient gets thin and weak, colliquative (frequent) diarrhea sets in, and incessant thirst and burning fever terminate his sufferings.”⁵
- II. **THE LIFE OF A LEPER.** What with the horrible condition of a leper, one might expect that people would show compassion to one so sore afflicted. But such was not the case. Instead, their burdens were increased. They had to take on a mourner’s appearance, and constantly cry out to others “unclean, unclean.” Alfred Edersheim, the great Christian Jewish scholar, remarks, “No one was even to salute him; his was to be low, inclining

towards the ground. If he even put his head into a place, it became unclean. No less a distance than six feet must be kept from a leper; or if the wind came from that direction, a hundred feet. One Rabbi boasted that he threw stones at them to keep them far off, while others hid themselves or ran away.”⁶

III. **LEPROSY ILLUSTRATES SIN.** Why so graphic a description of a disease that is almost non-existent today? Why preach a sermon on leprosy? From among all diseases, leprosy has been selected by the Holy Spirit to stand in Scripture as the supreme type of sin, *as seen by God!* Let us therefore study it so as to truly see the awful character of sin (Isaiah 1:4-6).

- (1) Leprosy is undoubtedly selected to be a special type of sin, on account of its extreme *loathsomeness*.
- (2) Another characteristic of the disease and sin is its *insignificant and often imperceptible beginning*.
- (3) It is *progressive*. It progresses slowly, but progress is sure. So it is with sin. (2 Timothy 3:13). “Sin may not develop in all with equal rapidity, but it does progress in every natural man outwardly or inwardly, with equal certainty.”⁷
- (4) Another mark of leprosy is that sooner or later it *affects the whole man*, again a symbol of sin.
- (5) As the disease progresses from bad to worse, the victim becomes more and more *insensible* (Ephesians 4:19, “past feeling”).
- (6) Another element of the solemn fitness of the type is found in the persistently *hereditary* nature of leprosy. Is anything more uniformly characteristic of sin (Romans 5:12-19)?
- (7) Among ancient Hebrews the disease was regarded as *incurable* by human means (see 2 Kings 5:7).
- (8) Lastly, the supreme lesson, as with the symbolic disease of the body, so with that of the soul, sin *shuts out from God and from fellowship of the holy* (see Revelation 21:7; 22:15).

IV. **THE LEPER’S CONDITION.** The leper knew his condition, his hopelessness, he was “full of leprosy” (Luke 5:12). Our condition without Christ is the same (Romans 5:6-8; Ephesians 2:1, 12). Trench writes, “The leper, thus fearfully bearing about in the body the outward and visible tokens of sin in the soul, was treated throughout as a sinner, as one in whom sin had reached its climax, as dead in trespasses and sins. He was himself a dreadful parable of death.”⁸ “. . . came to Jesus . . . beseeching him and falling on his knees . . .” (Mark 1:40). This outcast dared to approach Jesus! This fact provides two implications about the person of Jesus:

- (1) Jesus conveyed a *conviction of capability or power*.
- (2) Jesus conveyed a *conviction of openness and approachability* (in contrast to His contemporaries). The leper would have fled from a Rabbi, but Jesus was approachable (Hebrews 2:16-18; 4:13-16). One who had leprosy felt he could approach Jesus.

V. **THE LEPER’S CRY.** “. . . thou canst make me clean . . .” The leper was sure that Jesus was able to help. “. . . This is more an expression of confidence in Jesus’ ability,” Cranfield points out, “than of doubt about his willingness. But nevertheless it is an entreaty (perhaps approaching *Do cleanse me, for thou canst!*), and the section directs attention here and in the next verse to Jesus’ will to heal.”⁹

VI. **JESUS’ RESPONSE.** “. . . moved with compassion . . .” (Mark 1:41). “Compassion” (Gk. *splagchnisthesis*) – “the centre of human feeling and sensibility generally . . . a portion of man’s inward parts as the seat of feelings.”¹⁰ “. . . put forth His hand . . . and touched him . . .” (Matthew 8:3; Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13). “That touch,” writes Laidlaw, “was everything to the lonely outcast. It swept the barrier down that held him aloof from mankind. Every looker-on shrunk back for fear of defilement. All held their breath at the

unwonted boldness of the act. But the outstretched hand of the Son of Man was laid with fearless and loving clasp on the unclean.”¹¹ Calvin remarks, “By His word alone He might have healed the leper but He applied . . . the touch of His hand, to express the feeling of compassion.”¹² “. . . I am willing; be cleansed . . .” “Better still,” remarks Johnson, “there came social and civil restoration to family, friends, and the community.”¹³

VII. **JESUS’ SPIRIT-CENTERED INTEREST.** He immediately commanded the healed man not to tell of Jesus’ part and forceably sent the man away. Jesus shrank from the fame connected with miracles and from aspirations for mere temporal benefits. The man disobeyed Jesus. But Jesus would not become a mere humanitarian. He “withdraw Himself in the deserts, and prayed . . .” (Luke 5:15-16). He did not want to be known as a mere miracle performer, with the promise of physical and material blessing to all who would come to Him.

CONCLUSION: The Jesus we meet in the New Testament was approachable – especially by those who saw their own unworthiness. The New Testament *never* portrays Mary as a Co-redemptrix or as an intercessor. They focus on Christ *alone*, not Mary or the Apostles nor the saints. Christ *only* is the focus of the New Testament. Machen put it so well when he wrote, “In Christ, all things are ours. There is now no awful beyond of mystery and fear. We cannot explain the world. But we rejoice now that we cannot explain it. To us it is all unknown. But it contains no mysteries for our saviour. He is on the throne. He is at the centre. He is ground and explanation of all things. He pervades the remotest bounds. In Him all things consist. The world is full of dread, mysteries powers. They touch us already in a thousand woes. But from all of them we are safe. *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ S. Lewis Johnson, *Sermons on Matthew*, Believers Bible Bulletin (Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas, 1976), Lesson 25, p. 1.

² Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (MacMillan, 1909), p. 122.

³ *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), vol. I, p. 734.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster, 1958), I, p. 300-1.

⁵ Keil-Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1975), vol. I, p. 378.

⁶ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Longmans, 1896), vol. I, p. 495.

⁷ S. H. Kellog, *The Expositor’s Bible* (1921), vol. I, p. 322.

⁸ R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles and Parables of the Lord* (Revell, 1968), p. 231.

⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, St. Mark* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 91.

¹⁰ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1971), vol. VII, p. 551.

¹¹ John Laidlaw, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (Baker, 1956), P. 173.

¹² *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1972), vol. I, p. 244.

¹³ S. Lewis Johnson, *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *God Transcendent* (Eerdmans, 1949), p. 80.