

Introduction

When Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching. Then the narrator states that Jesus taught with authority in contrast to how the scribes did their teaching. Scribes were professional teachers of the Law, but they got muddled in tradition, which became their authority instead of the word of God they studied. This “muddlement” must always remind us of how important it is that we examine and re-examine all of our thinking about Scripture lest we lose sight of the truth, replacing it with the authority of our reason or tradition.

In contrast to the scribes, there was an all around consistency in the work of Christ. He embodied the will of the Father. He gave expression to the Father’s will in every word, every intonation, and in every deed. This balance of word and deed stands out beautifully in the first miracle recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, “The Cleansing of a Leper” (Mat 8.1-4). It was neither the first miracle that Jesus performed, nor is it the first miracle following the Sermon on the Mount (it took place in a city of Galilee, Lk 5.12). However, the biblical author placed this miracle adjacent to the Sermon, and surely, his purpose is to reveal something about our Lord’s teaching by means of the account of the leper. We should therefore read this healing narrative with the Sermon on the Mount ringing in our ears. What He taught by word, He also taught by deed.

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. ² And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” ³ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. ⁴ And Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”

To get at the meaning of the text we just read, we will cover three points today, 1) the leper’s request, 2) his answer, and 3) his duty. Then we can make some applications.

1A. Let us begin with his request

“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean” (v.2b). A number of things make this a most striking request.

1) First, this request is striking in its boldness

To appreciate the boldness of this man, all we have to do is think some about his leprosy. The writer points us in this direction by saying, **“behold, a leper came to meet him”** (v. 2a). He is saying, “Look, and look intently at something surprising, unusual, and unexpected.”

There is little doubt that what the Bible cites as leprosy still prevails by that name today. The words “leper” and “leprosy” come from the Greek word for scale. This indicates the effect on the skin that this disease causes. The skin loses its natural color, and it becomes thick, glossy, and scaly. The disease progresses to dirty sores and ulcerous-like open wounds. Numbness may occur in the extremities, followed by a loss of fingers and toes. Characteristically, there is an alteration in the voice box, resulting in speech that is horse and grating.

Leprosy of the hand was a sign God gave to assure Moses of his calling (Ex. 4.6-7) and it did the same as a judgment on his sister Miriam (Num 12.1-16, healing came through Moses intercession for her). Notably, under Mosaic Law, lepers were to live in separation outside the camp of Israel (Lev 14.3). They were unclean aliens.

The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ ⁴⁶ He

shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp (Lev 13.45-46).

In keeping with this alienation, we are not surprised that the ten lepers of Luke 17 “stood at a distance” when they met Jesus and lifted up their voices for healing (vs. 12-13).

Therefore, we must conclude that this leper was bold since the text says that he “**came to Jesus,**” and he did so in way that causes the narrator to stop and look, and to call us to stop and look, “**behold, a leper came to him.**” His action was noteworthy, striking, and bold because if he gets too close and someone touches him, that person becomes unclean. Ceremonial defilement was in effect contagious. Hence, the emphasis on exclusion and distance, but this leper boldly crossed the boundaries to make his request of Jesus.

2) Second, he made his request in a posture of worship

He “**knelt before Jesus**” (Mat 8.2a). Mark’s account states that the man “**fell on his face**” when he saw Jesus (1.12). This was an earnest and reverent request.

3) Third, the leper came to Jesus in faith

He came to the Lord with a bold reverence born of faith for he says, “**you can make me clean**” (8.2b).

Leprosy is an incurable disease. As I understand it, even modern science, with all of its discoveries and with the long history of leprosy that modern science possesses, has had only nominal success in treating this dread disease. It is a painful, ugly, paralyzing disease of the skin and extremities. In a fundamental way, one who has leprosy is in a physically hopeless state. The leper has a ruined life in a kind of living death as an alien from the human family and from the Israelite people of God. The notion of a living death is quite graphic in itself. When Moses prayed for his sister, he referred to her leprosy this way, “**Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away**” (Num 12.12), and in 2 Kings, to cure of leprosy is to “**make alive**” (5.7).

Nevertheless, this man, this leper, comes to Jesus and says, you can make me clean. There is no question about it. He has no question about the power of Jesus to make him whole. He does not question the ability of Christ with respect to his personal affliction. He believes in Jesus in a personal way regarding the deterioration of his body. He expresses the belief that all Jesus has to do is be willing and his much desired cleaning will become a reality.

4) Fourth, and perhaps the most striking part of the man’s request, is the submissiveness it shows. The bold, reverent, and trusting request is striking in its submission when he says, “**Lord, if you will**” (8.2b).

I do not know about you, but for me of all the features of this request, the outstanding element is the submission it demonstrates. Some readers may refer to this conditional (“if you are willing”) as the only element of doubt in the narrative. Granted, the conditional is the only place in the account that expresses the openness of the event. That is, saying “if” leaves the healing as an open issue. It is open-ended. The leper does not know what the Lord will do. However, it is not an expression of doubt. This is the high point of belief. This man shows a reverent and bold faith at its apex. Here is the dependence of faith (the dependent element that is so crucial to true faith). The man depends on the Lord Himself as a personal Lord who is free in all that He does. Thus, the man says, “If you will” by which he says, “I acknowledge and submit to the fact that my life, my physical health, my existence in total is in your hands, and all outcomes are due to your will, O Lord.”

Matthew stresses this acknowledgement of sovereignty in the request. Mark points out the strong beseeching element (Mk 1.40, “**the leper came to him, imploring him, if you will you can make me clean**”). Matthew accents only the roots of his request in the personal submission of this man to the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ.

5) Fifth, the request shows obedience to the Law

At first glance, it might appear that the leper did the unthinkable when he crossed the barrier between the unclean and the clean to meet with Jesus. However unusual it may be, there could be some interaction between lepers and God's people. When interaction occurred, the leper was to acknowledge his condition by saying of himself, "unclean, unclean." Accordingly, in obedience, this man states his uncleanness in his request for healing, "if you will, you can make me clean." He says, "I am in need. You are able to meet my need. I recognize and trust that fact. I am helpless. I cannot make any appeal of my merit or righteousness for I am corrupt and unclean. I can only make my request in submission to you and to your will."

This is an outstanding request is it not? It is bold, reverent, trusting, submissive, and obedient. It would appear that if Jesus did not heal him, he would go his way trusting Christ as sovereign Lord (saying, "not my will but your will be done" per the 3rd petition of the Lord's Family Prayer).

2A. His answer

What answer did the man receive from the Lord Jesus? Contagious disease or not, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched the man saying, "**I will; be clean.**" The answer the man received from Christ is extraordinary because "**immediately his leprosy was cleansed**" (Mat 8.3; cf. Mk 1.42, "**immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean**"). Our Lord's reply to this leper corresponds to the point made in the request: "you are able, so if you are willing, then my healing will be the sure result." If Jesus wills that something happen, then it will happen. He did will it and He cleansed the man of his leprosy.

3A. His duty

He has two duties: silence and sacrifice (Mat 8.4)

1B. Silence

There is an element of secrecy in these words: "**See that you say nothing to anyone.**" Contrary to what we might expect, his duty is a silent one. He is to tell no one; he is not to say anything to anyone. We might expect a cleansed leper to be a great light on a hill, but that spreading of light by personal testimony is *not* his duty. Strange as this may sound, it is simply another indication of where this event takes place in the history of redemption, and it confirms a history of redemption reading of Jesus' great Sermon. Simply put, the light on a hill teaching paves the way for the work of disciples in the church after the accomplishment of the work of Christ. However, we must still wonder why this man is duty bound to silence (why do we have what some have called "the messianic secret in the Gospels"?).

A number of reasons call for silence instead of housetop proclamation of what happened. We will be returning for a fuller look at these reasons later, but we can at least list them now.

1) It is a way to avoid the limitation of His ministry. Great crowds hinder quality work. He has compassion on the crowds, teaches them, and ministers to them, but the needs, demands, and logistics of ministering to large numbers cannot dictate His work (contra. Mk 1.45).

2) It is a way to avoid raising the opposition of the leadership to such an extent that it would lead to the Lord's premature death. He must accomplish all that the Father gave Him to do before entering into final suffering.

3) It is a way to accent His humility and thus to show Himself to be the true Messiah.

As G. Vos puts it, He performs miracles in as quiet a manner as possible. Thus, He does not draw unnecessary attention to Himself. This king is a humble king. The humility of Jesus is tethered to His work as the Lord's suffering servant promised in the OT.

For these reasons at least, the cleansed leper has the duty of silence. He also has another duty, that of sacrifice. The silence is not absolute since his action will serve as a testimony to the priests (Mat 8.4).

2B. Sacrifice

Leviticus 13-14 gives many details about what to do when there is a healing of a leper. Those who have the disease are “unclean” and when there is healing, then there must be a cleansing. The process of cleansing went like this. A priest went out of the camp to observe the healed person. If healing occurred, the priest then took two live birds, killed one, dipped the living bird in the blood of the dead bird, pronounced the person to be clean, and “let the living bird go into the open field” (Lev 14.4-7). Afterwards, the cleansed person could come into the camp (14.8), but not into his tent for a week. His return to the people of God came about in stages. He comes into the camp but not into his tent until the eighth day when the priest killed a lamb as a *guilt* offering. What happened next is interesting. The priest put some of blood of the lamb on the cleansed person’s right ear lobe, the thumb of his right hand, and the big toe of his right foot. The sacrificed lamb became “atonement for him before the Lord” as a “*sin* offering” and “he shall be clean” (Lev 14.12-20).

Thus, additional to the duty of silence, the leper had the duty of sacrifice by the direction of Jesus according to the command of Moses (presumably, the man did what Jesus commanded).

Concluding Applications

This is a marvelous account to soak into our thoughts and to ponder for applications. For example, we might draw out this application, namely, that Jesus fulfilled all the righteous demands of the Law. Although He has come to bring the great change from OT to NT, His relation to the Law is not that of abolition but fulfillment. Furthermore, He brings in the new wine of fulfillment gradually. Thus, he upholds the things “**that Moses commanded**” (Mat 8.4). The little ceremonial laws about birds and lambs with respect to lepers who find healing are part of what Jesus upheld in others and carried forward in accomplishment in Himself.

However true this may be, I think we need to brainstorm for something deeper. We need to dig deeper to obtain the treasure in this gold mine. A good starting point for brainstorming is this question, “how is the leper/sinner cleansed (of sin and its consequences), really?”

1) Cleansing from sin comes by the instrumentality of faith

It is hard to miss the bold boundary crossing faith of this leper. His request for cleansing by healing is an act of faith by which he receives restoration from the effects of sin (deterioration of the body in a living death). Thus, his healing pictures the restoration of sinners by the instrumentality of faith. This is a picture of justification by faith since justification involves a declaration analogous to the “be clean” pronounced by Jesus. The Lord declares the sinner’s deliverance from both the guilt and the corruption of sin by means of bold, reverent, obedient, and submissive faith. Saying, “if you will, you can make me clean,” is an example of the instrumentality of faith. This act of faith justifies, gives access to God and membership in His family. This is the good news of cleansing by grace through faith.

2) Cleansing from sin comes by the will of Christ

Of course, we must stress the fact that faith does not justify. Indeed, *Christ* justifies through faith. Faith does not say, “You have to save me because of my believing.” True faith says, “I am unclean and can make no claim on you Lord, nothing depends on me, everything depends on you, on what you will.

Surely, the accent here is on the free and efficacious will of Christ. The Lord Jesus “**gives life to whom He will**” (Jn 5.21) and revelation of the Father comes to whomever the Lord chooses to reveal Him:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mat 11.27).

Furthermore, there is no suggestion in the account of the leper that unless man is willing God cannot act on his behalf. The bottom line is whether God in Christ is willing. What about the fact that the “I will” of Jesus benefits this man after he comes to Jesus with his request. The very making of this bold, reverent, trusting, and submissive request shows that a change already

occurred in his heart. Thus, how God works with the body racked (and wrecked) by leprosy is an illustration of what God does in the heart (the truth of this point derives from the inability of the corrupt tree to bring forth the good fruit of saving faith, cf. 7.18b). What we have here is a divine free will that Jesus exercises sovereignly. We might profitably contrast this with what we hear so much of, namely, the religious person's experience, his quest for God, His acceptance of God by his own free will. In this account, everything looks away from man's will to the will of Christ as sovereign.

3) Cleansing from sin comes by the sacrifice of Christ

The miracle of *Jesus removes the OT separation of healing and cleansing*. The man seeks healing in the language of cleansing, "you can make me clean." Jesus grants healing in the language of cleansing: "be clean." In the OT promise of the gospel, leper's first found healing, and then they returned to the people of God in stages by the sacrifice of birds and lambs. The point that we should not miss may be subtle, but it is clear and powerful. This leper's healing and cleansing occurred at the same time. He has cleansing *before* he goes to the priests. Nevertheless, Jesus sends him to the priests, not for actual cleansing, but for ritual cleansing and as a testimony against the priests (thereby, if they fail to recognize who Jesus is, then they condemn themselves as unclean in a most profound sense). Consequently, the point is that this cleansing from leprosy actually takes place by sacrifice for sin.

Leprosy is a pungent symbol of sin, guilt, and corruption (of sin and its consequences on the human family and on human body). This disease is a picture of sin, of sinfulness, of the corruption, loathsomeness, alienation, and living death of sinners put outside the city walls. Pointedly then, Jesus underscores His commitment to the way of sacrifice for sinners. He stretched out His hand in compassion and touched the unclean thing that no one should touch. He identified Himself with those who are unclean in the fullest sense of that term. He identified with the living death of aliens from the family of God. He Himself shall exclaim, "Unclean, unclean" (I am unclean!), when He dies outside the camp in alienation from the city of God and from the God of the city. That He that knew no sin became sin for us means that He who knew no sin became leprous for us in our place. He took to Himself our guilt, defilement, and the consequences of disease, deterioration, dying, and death.

4) Cleansing from the leprosy of sin promises resurrection

Furthermore, stretching forth His hand, Jesus not only crossed the boundary between the clean and the unclean (making Himself unclean), but He also crossed the boundary from life to death (giving life to the dead). Therefore, Jesus is showing us that from His sacrifice on the cross comes the word of cleansing and by His resurrection, the bird dipped in blood will fly away into the open field. He heals the impossible corruption of the body by His sacrifice. Again, leprosy is a grotesque embodiment of death; a leper is a dead man walking around with half of his flesh eaten away. To cure of leprosy is equivalent to raising the dead. This is a profound promise of resurrection by Jesus through His death and resurrection.

What about the peculiar procedure back in the OT of placing blood and oil on people's ears, thumbs, and big toes? It shows in a very personal and graphic way that the remedy of sin and its consequences by Christ is complete in that it shows that the restoration of sinners is literally "from head to toe." The procedure is a way to fix the good news in our hearts that we may know that restoration is from head to thumb to toe. Thus, this miracle points ahead to full restoration of the corruption of our flesh. In my flesh, though eaten by disease and even by worms in the ground, in my flesh, I shall stand and see God (from fractured big toes to numb feet due to neuropathy, all the details covered by the accomplished work of Christ).

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. ²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God (Job 19.25-26).

This is gospel, good news, of Jesus and His accomplished work making sinners whiter than snow, a marvelously different "whiteness" than what comes with leprosy (good news indeed!).