

“The Untouchables Are Touched”

Mark 1:40-45

The Vision Team is in the final stages of clarifying what assignment God has for us to do as a body the next 3-5 years. The Vision Team has spent over a year of meeting twice a month for 2 hours or more each time. They have put in a lot of time and deserve a big applause. The Vision Team would also like to thank you for praying for us.

The Vision Team was not seeking what we might like to do and put it down on paper. If that were the case we could've been done in two meetings. Instead, there has been a lot of prayer, reading, discussion and even fasting to seek God's face. Soon you will hear what God has revealed to us. Part of the vision that God is directing us to do is to make a significant impact in vulnerable families. These families are in need spiritually, financially, socially, educationally. These families may feel rejected, judged, and alone. They may have their backs against the wall and feel like there is no hope. But there is hope and it is found in Jesus. He wants to use us to connect the dots from hope to Jesus to them.

In order to prepare us for this work, we need a fresh view of how God feels about those who are vulnerable- those who are untouchable in our society. May God's Word soften our hearts, cause us to well up with compassion, and want to be used by Him to meet those who are vulnerable and suffering.

We are going to be looking at one of my favorite passages in the Bible. Please turn with me to Mark chapter 1 beginning with verse 40, **[SLIDE]** “A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”⁴¹ Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning:⁴⁴ “See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.”

I. The Life of the Untouchable [SLIDE]

In Jesus' day there were many who were deemed untouchable- like women of ill repute and Samaritans. But the #1 untouchable in Jesus' day were lepers. Leprosy is a skin disease. Listen to a description of the disease "It begins with specks on the eyelids and on the palms, gradually spreading over the body, bleaching the hair white wherever they appear, crusting the affected parts with white scales, and causing terrible sores and swellings. From the skin the disease eats inward to the bones, rotting the whole body piecemeal." (*Easton's Bible dictionary*)

One of the biggest problems with leprosy is that the disease destroys nerve endings. As a result people lose their sense of pain and cannot tell when they have damaged a hand or foot or when an appendage has an infection. When you touch a hot stove, your nerve endings send messages to the brain to pull your hand away. Leprosy destroys those sensors so one's hand could receive 3rd degree burns and not know it.

Dr Paul Brand, a Christian missionary who conducted some of the most influential research on the disease, relates his investigation of why lepers in a colony in India were missing so many fingers and toes. There were isolated incidents of these digits being knocked off and recovered -- but many seemed to lose them at night, with no trace left. When attendants stayed up all night to watch, they found that rats were chewing off fingers and toes at night -- but the victims did not wake, for they felt nothing."

As the disease spreads, many lepers go blind -- not because of the disease itself, but because, without feeling in their eyes, they forget to blink. Blinking functions like our car's windshield wipers, washing away the impurities. It is pain that causes us to blink. No pain, no blinking. Dr Brand writes, "The loneliest people of all are the ones for whom leprosy has also destroyed their sight. Like many others in the world, they are blind, but unlike most of the blind they can't use their hands to bring them the sensations that their eyes are denied because they can't feel either."

As leprosy advances, the victim looks less and less human. No fingers. No toes. Face disappearing. Noses falling off. Here are two pictures showing the effects of leprosy. [SLIDE]

These are not the worst cases. I googled “Leprosy” and saw some pictures that made me turn away. I could not look very long because the pictures were so appalling. These pictures are tame in comparison.

Since Leprosy is contagious, Lepers were required to live away from others. Leviticus chapter 13-14 explain how the Israelites dealt with leprosy. Leviticus 13:45-46, “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!’⁴⁶ As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp.”

Torn clothes and unkempt hair represented a person in mourning. That was to be their constant state. They were called to mourn because those who contracted leprosy were considered sinners and deserving of the punishment. Leprosy was seen as God’s judgment for big sins.

Leprosy created isolation, rejection, banishment. One day you could be an important person with lots of friends and because of a skin disease you could lose it all. One day you could be worshiping at the Temple with family and friends. Then this disease pops up and you are no longer welcome at the Temple. You are considered unclean.

Lepers were the chief untouchables in Jesus’ day. Who are the untouchables in our society? Who have we isolated from society and from the prospect of hope? Two groups that stand out are people infected with HIV/AIDS and sex offenders. How can we tell if they are like the lepers of Jesus’ day? Let’s answer the following three questions: is the general public comfortable being around these two groups? Or is fear a regular response? Would the general public prefer that these two groups have their own location away from us? I have heard people say that all sex offenders should be rounded up and shipped to a deserted island and left there.

That is the same thing that people used to do with lepers. In the 1850s, there was a leper colony on the Island of Molokai, part of the Hawaiian Islands. People who were found with leprosy on the island of Hawaii were put into cages, shipped off to Molokai, and literally dumped into the ocean. Only those well enough to swim to shore would live. Many of them never made it to the

shore. Once on shore, the lepers faced total chaos. Everyone was sick. There was no medicine, no doctors, no shelters, no blankets, nothing but the weather beating on the exposed peninsula.

The result of this fear and judgment by the general public-and even the church, sex offenders and people living with HIV/AIDS feel rejected, despised, judged, persecuted and alone. They feel outside the camp and not welcome back in. They feel unclean and not welcome to worship alongside you and me. But is that God's view toward them?

Where can you turn when your life is hopeless and you feel despised, rejected and alone? The song "Come to Jesus" reads,

"Weak and wounded sinner

Lost and left to die

O, raise your head, for love is passing by

Come to Jesus

Come to Jesus

Come to Jesus and live!

You can turn to Jesus. And that is just what the leper did.

II. Jesus is the Hope for the Untouchable [SLIDE]

What we will see from this passage is three character traits of Jesus that give the untouchable hope. And these character traits are evident in Jesus throughout the gospels.

The first character trait that gives the Untouchable hope is:

Jesus is approachable [SLIDE]

Lepers were forbidden to approach someone who was clean. Lepers were to stay outside the towns and cities and if anyone clean were to approach they were required to yell, "Unclean! Unclean!" This would alert the clean person not to walk too close. But this leper disregarded the rules. He saw Jesus and knew there was something different about Him. Maybe he had heard about Jesus' healing ministry and that gave him hope. Or maybe seeing how Jesus related to those around Him made the leper believe that he could approach Jesus and not be turned away.

Whatever it was the leper came up to Jesus. Verse 40 says, “A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees.” The leper came face-to-face with Jesus and fell to his knees crying out passionately, “I beg of you, please”.

Jesus was not the only one present that day with the leper. There were others with Him. Can you see as the leper comes quickly toward Jesus, those around him start backing up? They wanted to be a safe distance away. And yet Jesus didn't talk one step backwards.

The leper begged Jesus and showed faith in Him. The leper said, “If you are willing you can make me clean.” The leper didn't question the ability of Jesus which is amazing because there were only two examples in the Old Testament where God healed a leper. The reality was once you contracted leprosy you would never be cured. But this untouchable believed that the man standing before Him had the power to do it. What the leper didn't know was whether Jesus would be willing to heal him. I am sure the leper had many reasons in his head why Jesus may not heal him. Maybe, the leper believed that he deserved the leprosy as judgment- after all he had been told that on several occasions. But the leper had to ask. With Jesus, anything is possible.

The leper learned about the second character trait of Jesus that gives the untouchable hope. He learned that:

Jesus is compassionate [SLIDE]

One of life's major bummers is being the last member in a family to come down with the flu. By the time you are sick the rest of the family has run out of compassion and sympathy.

Verse 41, “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”

The word compassion in our text has the idea of “deep pity”. Jesus saw the plight and heartache of the leper and He was deeply moved. He had to act to relieve the leper of his disease and restore him to life. So Jesus said, “I am willing, be clean!”

If you read through this passage too fast you might miss an amazing phrase, “Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.” In touching the leper, Jesus willingly became religiously unclean. The leper became clean as Jesus became religiously unclean. Does that sound familiar? 2 Cor. 5:21, “He who had no sin became sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

But that is not the only amazing thing about touching the leper. Jesus performed many miracles. Jesus healed people by just proclaiming they are healed. He didn't need to touch anyone to heal them of their diseases. He healed people that weren't even present at the time. But in this situation Jesus chose to touch the leper as he was healed. Put yourself in the leper's place. When was the last time you were touched by someone clean? When was the last time someone showed compassion and care for you? When was the last time a clean person looked you in the eyes without turning their head away in disgust? You cannot remember because it has been so long ago. Jesus touched the leper. Jesus gave the leper dignity and worth.

When Sadan contracted leprosy, he was rejected by his classmates, forcefully thrown off a public bus, was denied a job even though he had good training and talent and was turned away by hospitals with the harsh statement, “We don't treat lepers here.” Sadan tells the story how he came to meet Dr. Brand and his wife Margaret some 20 years earlier. He wrote, “I can still remember when Dr. Brand took my infected, bleeding feet in his hands. I had been to many doctors. A few had examined my hands and feet from a distance, but Drs. Paul and Margaret were the first medical doctors who dared to touch me. I had nearly forgotten what human touch felt like.”

Jesus does not turn away from us when we come to Him with our sickness and sin. He will never shun us. He knows exactly how that feels. He has experienced rejection, denial, hatred, abuse. So when we come to Him with our hurts and pain He has compassion. Psalm 34:18, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Just like the leper when the Savior touches you your life will never be the same.

The leper experienced first-hand Jesus' compassion. He also experienced the third character trait that gives the Untouchable hope:

Jesus is powerful [SLIDE]

Lepers were not supposed to be healed. They were not cured and restored to a new life. As I shared earlier there were only two occurrences when a leper was healed in the Old Testament. Miriam, Moses' sister became leprous due to judgment by God. She was healed after Moses prayed to God. Naaman was a highly regarded commander in the army of Aram. He had leprosy and the Prophet Elisha healed him. But these are the only two healings known in the world at that time. Rabbis believed that it was as difficult to heal the leper as to raise the dead.” (p. 89, *NICNT*)

But Jesus is God and is able to heal. He is able to restore the man- not just physically but also socially. He was given his life back. Rejection is gone. Despair is gone. Denial is gone. Aloneness is gone. No more living outside of town. He can now live on Main Street. He can now use his skills to work. No more begging. No more pity. No more judgment.

The power that Jesus has to restore the leper is available to us. Sin can be forgiven. Our past pain can be healed. Our shame can be taken away. A new life awaits those who come to Jesus. Just humbly come to Jesus and share your need. The second stanza to “Come to Jesus” says:
 “Now your burden's lifted
 And carried far away
 And precious blood has washed away the stain”

Following the miraculous healing, Jesus strongly warns the leper to keep the healing a secret and present himself to the priest. After the most amazing miracle, a man's whole life has been transformed and Jesus asks him to keep it quiet. You cannot blame the leper for speaking out with joy the good news. Jesus wanted the healed man to present himself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that go along with a healing of leprosy- a sacrifice that had not happened before. The reason Jesus wants him to follow through was according to verse 44, “a testimony to them.” “Them” is referring to the priests. The leper's new life was to be a testimony to the priests that the Messiah is here.

When John the Baptist was in prison he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him if He was the Messiah. This is what Jesus said in response, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” Mark 11:4-5

Jesus wanted the priests to be confronted with the truth that a leper was healed. Either they believed it or were held accountable for their disbelief.

We don't know if the man finally reported to a priest. But the text says the result of his sharing created problems for Jesus. Jesus was bombarded with people and could not preach in the synagogues. Instead, verse 45 says that Jesus “could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places.” Do you see the irony in this: the leper was free to enter the center of any town but Jesus could not any longer. Jesus was now the one at the outskirts of the towns and cities.

What can we take away from this passage? Let's take three applications home with us.

[SLIDE]

1. According to Jesus there are no untouchables. If we are His children and His body then our hands and feet are to be doing what He'd be doing.

The Catholic Bishop of the Hawaiian Islands, the Bishop of Honolulu, knew that there were seven to ten Catholics among the two or three hundred lepers living on Molokai. There was a young priest named Damien de Veuster who had been a carpenter before he became a priest. The Bishop asked Fr. Damien to go to the leper colony and put together a prefabricated chapel that had been sent there. Fr. Damien was to have no contact with the lepers, for the bishop did not have many priests, and did not want to lose Fr. Damien.

When Fr. Damien first saw the lepers he was frightened beyond belief. Fr. Damien was the first non-leper to stay overnight on their island. He didn't see the disease, he saw the people who were

suffering. He immediately began building shelters for the people. He constructed a Church and began having services. He was shocked to find over a hundred people wanting to pray with him, even though less than ten of them were Catholic. He was the first to show Christ's love to them.

A boat came to pick up Fr. Damien after his 30 day medical visa expired, but Fr. Damien wanted to stay. He built a water system, and turned the island into a little functioning community. He planted over a thousand trees to protect the people from the elements. He prayed for the people and with the people. Lepers of all faiths and no faith went to his Masses. They said, "He holds our hands when we die."

Father Damien, in the end contracted the disease himself, but he "believed that human beings, no matter what their affliction, should never be cast aside. It was up to the church to care for the sick, the unwanted, the unloved."

Who are the untouchables around you? Who does God want you to touch? Mother Theresa once said, "We have drugs for people with diseases like leprosy...But these drugs do not treat the main problem, the disease of being unwanted. That's what my sisters hope to provide." We may not be able to heal people's illnesses. But we can love them and let them know they are wanted.

[SLIDE]

2. Jesus separates Himself from all others religions. He is compassionate and powerful to those who are suffering.

Dr. Paul Brand saw how other religions dealt with suffering while living in India, "Buddhists taught a serene acceptance of suffering...Hindus and Muslims often faced suffering with a spirit of fatalism: to the Hindu it results from sins of a former life, and is the will of Allah to the Muslim. In contrast, Christianity has traditionally responded with the paradox modeled by Jesus: we must trust the goodness of God despite suffering and injustice we see around us, and yet do all we can to relieve it during our days on earth."

[SLIDE]

3. If you are hurting deeply you can come to Jesus. He will welcome you and not turn away.

No matter what you have done or was done to you. He will accept and cleanse you. Just come to Him.

Let's pray