

## OVERVIEW SERIES:

Matthew 8:104

### The Leper

In New Testament times, disease was rampant. Medical science and medicine as we know it was nonexistent. If a person survived a serious disease, it was usually because the disease had run its course. And, in most cases, the disease would leave its victim with great pain, or scarred for the rest of his or her life. Plagues would sometimes wipe out entire villages and cities. Life expectancy for anyone with a disease was short.

Matthew tells us that Jesus had just come down from the mountain, and great multitudes followed Him. The multitude probably followed Jesus because they were curious, curious of His authority because He spoke with authority, and curious because of the miracles He performed. They were as one writer said, “uncommitted observers.”

However, there was one in the crowd who saw something in Jesus that the rest did not see. This man according to verse 2 was “a leper.”

Leprosy was the most feared disease in the entire ancient world. Even today, I am told, that leprosy cannot be totally cured when contracted. Although some ninety percent of people in modern times are immune to this dreaded disease, this was not the case in the ancient world. Leprosy in our day is commonly called Hansen’s disease. But there is no small stir among scholars if Hansen’s disease is the same as biblical leprosy.

In order to protect His people Israel from this dreaded disease, God gave strict regulations to Moses in Leviticus 13 regarding leprosy. A person suspected of having leprosy was taken immediately to the priest for examination. If he showed signs of the disease, he was isolated for seven days. If the symptoms became worse, he was isolated for seven more days. If at that time, the rash had not spread, the person was pronounced clean. But if the rash spread, or had become worse, the person was pronounced unclean.

When a person was found to have the serious form of leprosy, his clothes were to be torn (in some cases his clothes were burned), his head uncovered, his mouth covered (to prevent spread of the disease), and he was to cry, “Unclean, unclean.” The leper then would dwell alone, without the camp of Israel.

This was a dreaded disease: Pain in certain parts of the body, then numbness in those parts, followed by spots in the skin that were not the original color of the skin. The skin gets to be thick, glossy and scaly. As the disease progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. One writer said, “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.” In a commentary that I was reading, it said, “Although advanced leprosy is generally not painful, because of the nerve damage, it is disfiguring, debilitating, and can be repulsive in the extreme. . . .”

The fact that the leper came to Jesus was astounding in itself, because lepers were forbidden to come close to anyone who was a non-leper. But this leper, regardless of the circumstances, came to Jesus. He did not shout at a distance. He did not fear the people. He did not hesitate when he approached Jesus. Somehow, he knew that Jesus was not afraid of him. Somehow, he knew that Jesus was not ashamed to associate with him. He came to Jesus with confidence – he sensed a love, a compassion, and a tenderness in Jesus that he had never sensed before.

The leper came to Jesus and he “worshipped him.” Literally, this means that he came and “bowed down before Jesus.” He came with respect one writer said. However, I think it was more than respect, it was reverence. He came with a humble adoration – he came to Jesus with a great reverence.

The leper came seeking, but not demanding anything. He said, “Lord, if thou wilt.” He asked to be healed only if it were the Lord’s will. The leper was quite content to remain leprous if that were the Lord’s will. For this leper, it was all about the Lord’s will, not his healing.

The leper however, came in faith. He said to Jesus, “thou canst make me clean.” Literally, Jesus, you have the power to make me clean. He had the absolute conviction that God was able. The leper knew that Jesus was not obligated to heal him, but he also knew that He was perfectly capable of doing it. He puts me in mind of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who said to Nebuchadnezzar, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Daniel 3:17-18). Either way, it doesn’t matter, it will be alright. That is faith in its highest order!

Then, “Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.” I love that, don’t you? Jews were

forbidden to touch a leper. They were not in any way to expose themselves to this kind of contamination. It was said, that they could not help a leper by touching him, but only harm themselves. Yet, here was no ordinary Jew – here was God reaching out to someone that the religious community would have absolutely no dealing with.

And in keeping with the teaching of Scripture, Jesus said in verse 4, “See thou tell no man; but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them” (ref. Leviticus 14:4-32).

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