

Misery and Mercy

Mark 1:39 - 2:1 *And He was preaching in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and casting out demons. ⁴⁰ Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." ⁴¹ Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." ⁴² As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. ⁴³ And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once, ⁴⁴ and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵ However, he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the matter, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction.*

Every year in the United States about 1,500 people have surgical objects accidentally left inside them after surgery, according to medical studies. What's very interesting is that not everyone who discovers this medical malpractice automatically sues the doctor. Instead, some studies have found that doctors with a very good bedside manner, displaying real compassion for their patients are often enough not sued, even when having left scalpels and forceps inside the patient by accident. By contrast, doctors with poor bedside manners were often sued for matters far less serious than leaving stainless steel tweezers in the tummy.

We can understand that though. When it comes to our health and our bodies, we want our doctors to do more than push and probe at us like we are monkeys in an experiment. We want them to show genuine care and interest. We want our doctors to display compassion: that they sympathise with us in our sickness or weakness or discomfort, and genuinely want to see us get better.

If that is true of our doctors, who care for our bodies, what should we hope for when it comes to God, the physician of our souls? What kind of doctor is the Lord, when it comes to not just the physical, but the whole condition of our lives?

This account in Mark gives us part of the answer. This passage allows us to see what happens when misery meets the Maker. What kind of bedside manner does Christ have? Is He cold and dismissive? Is He warm and inviting?

This becomes crucial for all of us, because if Jesus really is the Son of God, then He is the only Saviour. If He is the only Saviour, then everyone must come to Him, and apply to Him for salvation. What kind of reception will we get when we come to Him?

To help us understand where this scene fits in the life of Christ, remember that at the beginning of Christ's ministry, He presented Himself publicly to Israel, focusing on the northern province of Galilee. For several months, Jesus peppered the land with His claims about Himself : that He was God in the flesh and the promised Messiah. And like you see in verse 39, the primary way He did this was by entering the synagogues, the official place where preaching took place, and there He preached. He accompanied His preaching with miracles that drew more attention to Him, and authenticated His claims. Verse 39 is like a summary of one of Jesus first preaching tours throughout Galilee. But during this tour, Jesus encountered a man with leprosy. This scene was so striking, so remarkable, that Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this incident.

As we study this event, we'll see three stages in the account that show us what kind of heart God has for those that come to Him.

I. A Sinner's Misery

A leper came to Jesus. What is a leper? In the Bible, *leprosy* covered a fairly wide range of diseases. It may have included what we think of leprosy today, which is called Hansen's disease, where the nerves in the skin die, and there can be loss of limbs. But it obviously included other conditions, where the skin whitened, and the hair whitened, in some cases it involved boils and sores. Whatever it was, there was a whole procedure given in Leviticus 13 and 14 to determine if someone truly had leprosy. And if he were declared leprous, his life changed in tragic ways – some of them biblically required other brought about by the rabbis.

He was banished from walled towns, and punished by 39 lashes if he entered. He would never again enter the city of David, Jerusalem, or see the Temple. He had to be the first to enter a synagogue, and the last to leave, and he had to occupy a separate little compartment. As he walked about, he was to have the appearance of a mourner so that he could be identified – his clothes torn, his hair dishevelled, the lower part of his face and his upper lip covered, while he cried out both as a warning to others and as a statement about himself, “Unclean! Unclean!”

When people heard this, they were to supposedly pray for him, but for the most part, it was a warning to avoid him. No one was even to greet him. If he even put his head into a place, it became unclean. For the rabbis, a distance of at least two metres was to be kept from a leper at all times and if the wind came from his direction, nothing less than thirty metres. Some rabbis wrote that they would not eat an egg purchased in a street where there was a leper, while another rabbi boasted that he always threw stones at them to keep them far off (Edersheim, 496). Rabbinic logic was so twisted that it did not allow a leper to wash his own face.

This was a living death – physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. Your body was wasting away. Emotionally, we can't help picturing the leper as living in nearly perpetual depression and despair. Socially, you could no longer live with your family, or with the community. All hope of having a family, or living with your existing family was over. You would never again feel a human being touch you, embrace you, hold your hand, or touch your arm. You had been rendered unclean in Jewish society, which had moral connotations. It was assumed that you had this leprosy for your sin, and were being punished for it. Dying, isolated, rejected.

Now think about this. What is it that God was picturing here for Israel and for all who now read His Word? Something that is more than skin deep (Lev. 13:3), that brings death, that spreads (Lev. 13:5–8, that defiles you and isolates you (Lev. 13:44–46), that fills you with misery and pain, and according to Leviticus 13:47-59, renders things fit only for fire? (Wiersbe, Mk1:29)

Sin. Disobeying God destroys us. It brings the curse that we suffer in our bodies. It fills our lives with anguish, disappointment, frustration, and pain. It divides and isolates us from each other. It spreads among us. And ultimately, there is only one place God can send uncleansed, unforgiven sinners – to a lake of fire.

In God's sight, the unforgiven sinner is in worse shape than that leper was physically. From God's point of view, it doesn't matter how shiny your car, your phone or your smile is, if you live before Him without having been forgiven for your sins against Him, your state is like this leper's and worse.

What did this poor, miserable man do?

He did something very surprising. In fact, he did three very surprising things. First, he came to Jesus. What did the rabbis do when a leper came? They fled, or even threw stones at them. Here this

leper approaches Jesus. He comes to Jesus. How did He know that Jesus would not do the same thing as the other rabbis? Perhaps he had heard about Jesus, heard about His kindness to the afflicted; heard about His amazing teaching about God's grace. For whatever reason, he did not just stay where he was, and assume that Jesus is just like the rest of them. He came.

The second thing he did was to beg Jesus. The word *beg* in the original means to implore for help, to appeal to someone to come to your side. This was his one chance for a new life, and he was not going to take it lightly. He was not going to think about if he looked proper. He did not seem to worry about appearing desperate, or seeming helpless. All pride was out the window. He knew his state was wretched. He knew for a leper to posture as being generally fine and just needing a little help from Jesus was ridiculous. He was utterly humbled. So much so that the third thing he did was to fall on his knees before Jesus.

He is on his knees. This is a posture of total submission and humility. When you are on your knees, you are not eyeball to eyeball with the person you are speaking to – you are beneath him. When you are on your knees, you cannot move or manoeuvre, and the king could cut off your head with a sword, if he wished, you are placing yourself at his mercy. This man is humbling himself under Jesus.

Now listen to this leper's statement: "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

This is amazing. According to the rabbis, leprosy was humanly incurable. The rabbis had all kinds of magical and medical remedies for various diseases, but when it came to leprosy, they had nothing to say. Israel recognised that only One could heal leprosy, and that was God. In the Old Testament, only two people had ever been healed of leprosy, Naaman, who came to Elishah, and Miriam, who was healed at Moses' request.

He has total faith in Jesus' power to heal him. He had no doubt that Jesus could heal Him. As far as he was concerned, the outcome of the matter lay entirely with Jesus' will, not His ability. He knew Jesus could heal him, it all came down to whether Jesus *would* heal him. We can take a page out of this man's prayer book. God, you are able to do anything you wish to do, so I ask you to do this, if you wish.

The man tells Jesus, You can heal me, if only You desire to heal me.

If leprosy is a picture of sin, how is this man an example to us? Nothing would be more ridiculous than this leper trying to pretend he was doing fine. And so nothing looks more foolish to heaven than to see sinners in their misery pretending that they do not need Christ's forgiveness. As sin cuts deeper and deeper into lives, destroying more and more things, the worst thing we can do is hang onto our pride; to pretend to be self-sufficient; to fear looking desperate; to try to deal with God as if He is your equal. If you will not run to Christ, beg Christ, fall on your knees before Christ, then you are a leper adjusting his hair. You are a leper checking her eyeliner and making sure her lipstick is not smudged. You are a leper pretending all is well when your condition is obviously desperate.

What does Jesus do with someone like this? Since Jesus revealed the Father, we can ask, what does God do when people in a helpless, miserable condition come to Him and beg Him for mercy?

II. A Saviour's Mercy

What do we see as we look into the face of Jesus? The teeth clenching and jaw tightening as He

prepares to cast the man out? The lip curling into a sneer, the expression turning into a scowl, as Jesus backs away and turns away leaving the man on his knees sobbing?

What do we see?

Verse 41 -Jesus, *moved with compassion*

What does this phrase mean, “Moved with compassion”? It's used of Jesus at least eight times in the Gospels. Jesus felt the same thing when he saw the crowds; when he saw blind men needing healing; when he saw a widow at the funeral of her only son. What does it mean?

It's hard to describe this word. As you know, the New Testament was written in Greek. The Greeks thought about the human being as being in three parts – the mind, or the reason, the passionate urges, and the noble desires. In Greek, that was the *kephale*, the *koilia*, and then the good and noble desires – the *splanchna*. For the Greeks, the deepest and best and highest desires were here in the *splanchna*. And this word for compassion is actually a form of *splanchna* – Jesus was moved at the very seat of His affections, He was stirred at the deepest level, He was profoundly affected.

You know what that is like – to see a scene of deep suffering, of terrible anguish, when you feel compassion, you feel it within. Compassion is literally, to suffer together. You internalise someone else's pain. You feel what he feels, you experience what she experiences, and it pains you. This is what Jesus felt. This is what God the Son felt.

Does God really feel this? Does the God who knows all, is not surprised by anything, does He really experience compassion? Listen to what He said about His people Israel because of their backsliding:

Hosea 11:8 " *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred.*

This is what God feels towards those in the grip of sin's misery. He sees what sin has done to our marriages, to our workplaces, to our bodies. He sees what sin has made of our lives. We are a broken race. Our Creator hates our rebellion but grieves over our condition. He hates what sin has done to us, but He loves us.

We live in a world ruined by our sin. It is filled with the bitter taste of rebelling against our Creator. But in the middle of all this, God still works to heal, restore and show compassion.

However, did all of this inner emotion do nothing more than cause a lump in the throat? Not so, Jesus did far more than feel. He acted.

The next phrase of verse 41 tells us what He did: He stretched out *His* hand and touched him. I think we are not far off if we imagine some people gasping and even exclaiming as Jesus did this. Jesus was doing the unthinkable. Not only was He not fleeing from a leper – He was reaching out to him, literally extending the hand, and touching him.

Now think about it. Did Jesus always touch the people He healed? No. Clearly, He did not have to touch people to heal them. So, why, in this case, where touch was the very last thing you wanted to do, did He touch the leper? Why do you think?

If He didn't have to, it must be because He wanted to. He wanted to show He was not subject to all

the rabbinic rules about ritual defilement. And to say, I am not aloof from your misery, your pain, your defilement. I have come to share in your sufferings, and in the end, to bear them for you.

1 Peter 2:24 ²⁴ *who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness -- by whose stripes you were healed.*

And Jesus replies to the leper's humble statement with a touching, gentle reply, "I am willing. Be cleansed."

What a happy day, to hear Jesus say, "I am willing. It is my desire."! We have heaven and earth on our side if it is Jesus' desire to heal us, to help us, to cleanse us, to forgive us. Indeed, if God be for us, who can be against us!

Sinners need not be concerned that God does not want to save them, that He does not want to forgive them. He does. He has said He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to salvation, He has said that He is willing for all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

The sinner who comes to God and says, if you are willing, you can cleanse me and forgive me of my sin, will hear from God, "I am willing. Through the cross of Christ, be cleansed."

The problem is not in God's willingness to forgive; it lies in sinners' willingness to come. The problem lies not in a lack of mercy from God, but in a lack of humility from men.

Perhaps you are one of those people who thinks of God as only angry. You have sinned, and you avoid coming to Him to confess, you avoid Him. You imagine Him to be only reproachful, so you avoid church, God's people, prayer, and so you suffer even longer.

Jesus simply spoke the word, 'be clean'. What was the result?

III. A Significant Miracle

Upon the command of Jesus, the leprosy immediately departed. He was completely cleansed. Everyone could see it and verify it. There was nothing slow or progressive about it. The man was instantaneously, completely healed of leprosy.

Can you imagine the man's elation? As he looked at his skin, saw its full restoration, he knew that everything he thought had been taken from him would be given back – family, friends, a job, social contacts, living with people, attending the Temple. He had his life back!

So we felt the day we trusted Jesus Christ. Spurgeon said, "Oh! what a sweet season is that when Jesus takes away the pain of sin! When the Lord first pardoned my sin, I was so joyous that I could scarce refrain from dancing. I thought on my road home from the house where I had been set at liberty, that I must tell the stones in the street the story of my deliverance. So full was my soul of joy, that I wanted to tell every snow-flake that was falling from heaven, of the wondrous love of Jesus, who had blotted out the sins of one of the chief of rebels. "

Jesus now uses the same authority to instruct the man about what he is to do next. He gives him a strong warning not to tell everyone what He had just done. Instead, he is to meet the requirements of the Law by travelling down to Jerusalem, to the Temple to present himself to the priests, present the necessary sacrifice so that the priests can declare him to be ritually clean and free from leprosy.

When this former leper arrives in Jerusalem, and the priests realise he has been healed of leprosy,

what will they conclude? Only two other cases of cured leprosy are found in the Old Testament, and they were both miracles. They would have to conclude that Messiah is indeed here. If the priests declared the leper clean, but rejected the One who cleansed him, this would be a witness against them.

Everyone wants to know, why Jesus told the man not to say anything to anyone about his healing? Well, verse 45 is the answer to that question. Instead of obeying Jesus, he went out, began declaring it, spreading the news far and wide, and the result was, Jesus was mobbed wherever He went. The healing of a leper had never been heard of, and this made Him an absolute folk hero, a source of near hysterical fascination. At this point in His ministry, He was so popular that He could not openly enter a city without being mobbed by crowds. He was not able to accomplish anything, because, instead of people patiently listening to His message, they were now thronging Him to see signs and miracles. That's exactly what Jesus did not want. He did not want to amuse people, entertain people, wow people. He came to present Himself, and that kind of popular adulation actually got in the way, and He had to go to secluded places, where sincere people would have to seek Him out.

Here is a strange irony. Here was a leper cleansed of his leprosy, who was told by Jesus to keep quiet about what Jesus had done for him, and he told everyone. But here are many New Testament Christians cleansed of our sin, and we are told by Jesus to tell everyone, and yet we keep quiet!

The point of the miracle is how certain it is that God will help and deliver the humble and the helpless. God's response to humble, needy people is a heart of compassion. Jesus is a welcoming Saviour. He does not turn away the helpless and the humble.

The world is fond of saying, God helps those who help themselves. But the Bible says nothing like that. Instead, God helps those who have given up helping themselves, and are falling before the mercy of God. People who come to Him in their miserable state, looking to Him to forgive, to save, do not see a hardened face. He does not throw rocks at them or flee. They see one who is moved with compassion, stretching out the hand, touching, and saying, "I do desire that you be saved."

The people who will ultimately see only the anger of God will be those who rejected His mercy. It will be those who denied that they needed mercy and compassion. Because we are actually in the position of the leper, whether we admit it or not.

So what do you see in your mind's eye, when you approach God? And when you approach, are you approaching Him like one who is quite well, or one who needs mercy? The one who comes to God as God - humbly, broken, admitting the miserable condition that sin puts us in, looks up to see the compassionate face of Christ.

If you have not come to Him yet, why do you wait? Do you think there is a better day than today? Do you think there will a time more suited to asking Him for forgiveness and mercy?

Indeed, believer, have you stopped coming to Him for daily mercies? He is still a High Priest who sympathises.

He is able. He is willing. Are you willing?