

"I Am Willing -- Be Cleansed!"

Have you ever felt like an outcast? Have you ever felt some shame or reproach because for some reason you were not accepted by others? In our passage for today, we see a leper who would have surely been just that - an outcast. In the ancient Near East, it is generally believed that leprosy was a name given to several diseases of the skin, but none for which there was any known treatment. And among Israel, according to the Old Testament Law, lepers had to live alone outside the camp, away from everyone else, and wherever they went they would have to cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" as a warning to any around them. And yet here in this passage we see Jesus heal this leper. Now it would be easy to quickly read over this passage and just note this as yet another miracle of Jesus. And yet as we look at this passage, we'll see how it beautifully shows forth the nature of the kingdom which Jesus is bringing. And we'll see how the cleansing of this leper looks forwards to the cleansing that Jesus would bring on the cross for all of us - for we all are ultimately outcasts from God because of our sinful rebellion. We all are people who are unclean from the infecting filth of our sin and guilt. We all need to be made clean. And so then let's look at what this passage has to say about this cleansing of this leper, and ultimately what it tells us about our own cleansing.

Look with me first at verse 40. Notice what need the leper presents. He comes to Jesus with the desire to be made clean. The leper doesn't describe his condition medically. He doesn't say he needs to be healed from leprosy, from a skin disease. Yes, clearly, that's what the leper has in mind, for when Jesus responds by cleansing him, the result is that his leprosy leaves him (vs 42). But what the leper asks for is to be made clean. This is significant because it brings out the state of this leper. Being a leper meant that you were unclean. This is what Lev 13:46 says, talking of the leper, saying, "He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." Surely being leprous probably just made you feel unclean - your flesh all over being eaten away by disease. And since you would have been believed to be a risk to spread the disease to others you probably would have felt all the more unclean. How much worse must you have felt when you had to yell "Unclean!" everywhere you went!

But this is more than just a biblical quarantine. This effect of leprosy had more than just physical and social ramifications. The verdict pronounced on lepers under the Mosaic covenant served to separate them from God's people, and ultimately from God's presence. When someone was identified as a leper under the Mosaic covenant, they were declared ceremonially unclean. Their banishment from the camp where the people dwelt not only signified their removal from other humans, but it signaled their separation from God's presence who dwelt in the temple in the midst of the people. 2 Chronicles 26:21 describes this when it talks about King Uzziah, saying, "King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house -- leprous, and excluded from the temple of the LORD." Of course, King Uzziah obviously had special privilege; he had a house, even while being leprous. But despite his special privilege as king, even he still could not enter the temple of the Lord, because of his condition.

You see, a leper, under the Mosaic covenant, was ceremonially unclean. There were many things under the Mosaic covenant that could make someone unclean, many which were temporary. For example, if you touched the carcasses of certain dead animals, you would be ceremonially unclean until the evening. But whoever was ceremonially

unclean could not enter the temple of the Lord until their uncleanness was removed, according to the provisions listed in Scripture. These regulations were part of the ceremonial laws of Israel. They were a reminder of the holiness of God who chose Israel as a nation to dwell among them. These ceremonial laws set them apart from all the other nations as God's special people. But these ceremonial laws also reminded God's people that God was a holy God and because of this, nothing profane and unclean could come before him. And so these ceremonial laws served as a visible picture of God's holiness, just as God's temple in Jerusalem, served as a visible sign of God's special presence among Israel. The Old Testament is full of these sorts of visual signs and pictures that pointed to greater spiritual truths.

And yet for this leper in our story, the result of all this is that he was cast off from God's presence and from God's people. He was an outcast. He was separated from the blessings and privilege of worship at the temple and from the privileges of being part of God's people. And for him, this was not a temporary uncleanness. He didn't just have to wait a certain number of days to become clean. For him, there was effectively no hope in sight, unless something miraculous happened. Surely he must have felt forsaken by God and his covenant and longed for restoration. And yet in the Mosaic Covenant, there was no provision, save God's miraculous healing, for a leper to be restored to fellowship among God's chosen people.

And so that's a bit of the context of this leper whom we see in our passage. Look with me now again at verse 40. Look at this humble appeal the leper makes to Jesus. This leper evidently sought out Jesus. It says in verse 40 that the leper came to Jesus, imploring him, and kneeling before him. This word for "imploring" is a word of strong appeal. It means to urge or beseech. Notice that the leper is not yelling "Unclean!" here, but instead begging to be made clean, humbly kneeling before Jesus. And his appeal is also one of faith. The leper confidently affirms that Jesus is able to make him clean. Though the Mosaic Covenant had no ability to make this leper clean, Jesus he believes can make him clean. And yet though the leper is confident of Jesus' ability, he is not as sure of Jesus' willingness. That's the crux of the question that the leper puts to Jesus. The leper says to Jesus, "if you are willing, you can make me clean". So many might have said, "if you are *able*, then make me clean", but this believing leper says, if you are *willing*, you can make me clean.

And the response by Jesus is that he is willing. But notice what Jesus does first. Jesus touches him, verse 41. Don't miss that. Jesus touched him. This leprous man, whose very skin was erupting with disease, Jesus compassionately touched. Who knows the last time someone had reached out and touched this leper? Who would want to risk catching this terrible disease? And who would want to be ceremonially unclean as well? For there are a number of passages in the Old Testament that talk about how even the mere touching of something that is ceremonially unclean would make someone ceremonially unclean themselves, at least for a time. And yet Jesus, without hesitation, touches this man. Think about that. Jesus didn't need to touch this man in order to heal him. And yet as a sign of compassion, but also as a sign of the kingdom come, Jesus touches him. For when Jesus touches him, it is not Jesus who is made unclean, but it is the man who is made clean! As Jesus touched him, he pronounces his healing saying, "I am willing; be cleansed," and immediately the leper was healed! Jesus' healing of this leper through his touch and through his words showed that a greater kingdom was arriving, which was already beginning to do away with the old ceremonial laws of cleanness in light of the greater cleansing power which would come in Christ.

And yet in verse 44, Jesus then charged the man to go to the priest and offer for his cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them. Here we

are reminded that this leper lived during a time of transition. Though Jesus was there to announce the coming of the kingdom, the kingdom had not yet come. The kingdom would be inaugurated on the cross as seen with the tearing of the temple veil; but that had not yet happened. The temple veil had not yet been torn. And so the leper, in order to benefit from his newfound cleanness was told to go and follow the Old Testament regulations on how to be restored back to the status of being ceremonial clean. This would allow him to once again live with everyone else, and more importantly, to worship God at the temple. And so, though Jesus had already made him clean, he had to still go through several more steps to be declared ceremonially clean by the priest. Listen to the process from Leviticus 14:1-7:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall look. Then, if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person, the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop. And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird go into the open field.

That's a bit graphic, I know. But that's only the first step. After that, the healed leper would be allowed to return into camp, but couldn't enter his tent again yet. He'd had to wait outside his tent for 7 more days, undergoing a ritual washing, and then finally on the 8th day he would go to the priest to offer a final sacrifice to atone for his sins. At that point, he would finally be declared ceremonially clean. Quite a process, huh? And yet this whole process really symbolizes life from death. The leper, being an outcast and previously thought to be permanently unclean, is someone who in many ways was as good as dead. The sacrifice with the two birds shows this. One bird is killed, while the other is dipped in that bird's blood and set free. That same blood is then sprinkled on the healed leper - showing his identity with both birds, as one who had been dead, but through his healing was being granted new life! In the 8 day waiting period, Calvin saw another sort of new birth imagery, for the 8th day is also when newborns were circumcised, being brought into the covenant community as members. And so this whole process of ceremonially restoring the healed leper showed life from death. And in our passage, Jesus had commanded this healed leper to report to the priest to go through this process, ultimately as a testimony to them. Surely, this was a testimony to the coming of the kingdom and the coming of the king.

And yet, our passage does not record whether or not the leper ever obeyed Jesus and went to the priest. Instead it records that the leper disobeyed Jesus and instead started telling everyone about how Jesus healed him. And it's in the leper's disobedience something interesting can be seen. It's in his disobedience, that Jesus becomes like the leper in one sense. Look at verse 45. Because the leper spread the news so well, Jesus now could no longer enter the city, but was outside in deserted places. Jesus healed the leper, the outcast who could not enter the city but had to stay in deserted places. Now Jesus is the one who cannot enter the city but had to stay in deserted places. In Jesus' healing of the man, he in a sense takes on some of his shame. This of course foreshadows the way that Jesus would ultimately cleanse all his people!

And so the healing of this leper shows the limitations of the Old Testament kingdom of Israel. The leper, in the kingdom of Israel, effectively had no place. Apart from a miraculous healing, the leper was destined to spend his days in solitude, away from God's people, an outcast in the land of Promise. But is that what Jesus is doing here - just giving the leper a miraculous healing? Is he only intervening in the leper's life, healing him, so that he can return to a place of privilege among God's people? There were miraculous healings in the Old Testament of lepers. If all Jesus was doing was healing the man, then this miracle would be no different than those miracles. Well maybe if the story of Jesus stopped here, we might think of Jesus healing in only that limited way. But the story doesn't stop here. It ultimately comes to a climax on the cross. And along the way, Jesus keeps talking about the kingdom. And so Jesus is showing that something better is coming. His cleansing of the leper was a testimony that a better kingdom was on its way. That better kingdom would, in part, come at the cross.

For it is at the cross where Jesus would secure the true cleansing for his people. Already in our passage, in verse 45, we saw how Jesus was beginning to be identified with the leper, being forced to stay outside the city. And yet on the cross, this identification comes to a climax, showing the beauty of the gospel. The leper was forced to go outside the city -- Jesus himself suffered outside the city, crucified on the mount of Calvary. In the words of Hebrews 13, on the cross, Jesus suffered "outside the camp." The leper surely felt forsaken by God - Jesus on the cross tasted the true forsaking of God, when he cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The leper was unclean - Jesus on the cross became all uncleanness, by becoming sin, so that he might cleanse his people from all their sins. In our passage, the leper asked if Jesus was *willing* to make him clean - Jesus *willingly* went to the cross, saying in John 10, that "no one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord". On the cross, Jesus takes the visual picture of the leper's plight, and he becomes that picture. On the cross, what was pictured in the Old Testament's ceremonial laws for the unclean, is what Jesus became. The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Christ at the cross.

Think about this even in terms of the sacrifices we read about that were required for the leper to be restored to a state of being ceremonially clean. The cross is a sign of their fulfillment as well. Remember the first step a healed leper would have to go through. He'd have to bring two birds, kill one, spill its blood, dip the live bird in the dead bird's blood, and let the live bird go free. And the blood would also be sprinkled on the healed leper -- showing his identity with both birds. Now commentators have not agreed to all the significance of every aspect of this intricate sacrifice. But when we think about the cross, we can see some beautiful parallels. This bird that had to be slain, its blood shed, is a picture of Christ's own blood that was shed. On the cross, Jesus' death atoned for our sins. He died in our place for all uncleanness. And yet remember there were two birds. One bird symbolized death. But the other bird symbolized life. Life from death - that is the cross and the gospel. For Jesus did not remain dead, but on the third day he broke forth with new life in the resurrection!

I've been describing the cross particularly in relation to the leper and the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, but I hope that it is clear to see how this ultimately relates to us. Leprosy was only a physical outward uncleanness. What really makes someone unclean is our inward depravity - our sinful nature that lives in rebellion against God. Jesus healing of the leper, and even this picture of Jesus' bearing the reproach of lepers on the cross, is ultimately a picture about all of us. The picture of Jesus fulfilling the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, is ultimately a picture of all of us. And so what is pictured on the cross is ultimately about Jesus cleansing each of us from our sins. And so the

cross is a picture of our union with Christ. On the cross, Christ identifies with each of his elect, bearing their internal uncleanness on the cross, becoming unclean for them -- for us, that we might be clean. On the cross, Jesus secured this cleansing, so that when each of us comes to Jesus saying, Lord, make me clean, he can respond, "I am willing; be cleansed". And though these words may seem so simple to utter, we know that the cross was not something simple. On the cross, he bore our shame and reproach, the very wrath of God that was due for us. And yet how willing indeed was our savior to suffer and die for us, that we could be made clean again, and be granted full status as members in the glorious kingdom of heaven.

And that is exactly the result of Christ's work on the cross. We now can be citizens of this heavenly kingdom. And by Jesus miraculously healing this leper, he showed the surpassing greatness of this kingdom which he was announcing, compared with the old kingdom. Remember in the Old Testament kingdom of Israel, this leper was an outcast of the kingdom, culminating in the fact that he could not go to the temple of the Lord. He was excluded from God's special presence at the temple. But in this new kingdom, no longer will anyone in this kingdom be excluded from the temple of the Lord because of leprosy. Why? How do we know this? Because at the cross, when Jesus died, the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. The very curtain that separated, not just lepers, but even all God's people, from the Holy of Holies in the temple -- this curtain was torn. The tearing of the temple curtain at the cross, announced the fulfillment of all the ceremonial laws in Christ. They were now done away, abrogated, because they had found their fulfillment in Christ. Christ had made his people clean, so that now in the new covenant, there is no longer any physical temple. Instead, God dwells with each of his saints by the Holy Spirit. Together, the saints themselves make up the new temple of God. Not a temple of wood or brick, but a temple of humans. And how could the most holy God dwell in sinful humans? If the Old Testament temple was surrounded with so many ceremonial laws to protect its holiness, so that God could dwell in it -- how could sinful humans now be his abode? Only because of the cross of Christ! Only because of the cleansing, life-giving, blood of Jesus which sanctifies us, cleanses us, makes us holy.

Now, we who are Christ's have access to God by one Spirit. This is why in the New Testament Jesus says that we are to now worship God, not in a physical temple in Jerusalem, but in Spirit and in Truth (John 4). All the ceremonial laws that sought to restrict our access to God, all of the sacrifices they mandated to make someone clean, all of these find their fulfillment in Christ on the cross. Now, we are no longer restricted in our access to God by these things. Instead, now Scripture declares, that nothing is able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39)! Saints of God, do you see how much greater is the kingdom here which Christ has announced? Do you see how much greater is the cleanness he has secured for us on the cross? No more birds to sacrifice. No more living as an outcast from God's people. We are now one body, united together, and made clean by the once-shed blood of Christ, sprinkled on us even as signified by the sprinkling of the waters of baptism. Praise the Lord that Jesus was *willing* to die for us, that we might live.

Trinity, this is a wonderful gospel truth. How then ought we to respond? As Christians who have been cleansed by Jesus, how should we respond? In light of the gospel, God call us to respond in gratitude through our obedience. And so I'd like to end our sermon today by proposing two examples of how we might we respond, two ways in which we might respond to the amazing good news which we have been reminded of this morning.

And so the first response I propose is this: Respond by offering yourself as an offering to the Lord. What I mean is this. The leper who was healed in our passage was told in verse 44 by Jesus to go to the priest and offer for his cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony. How much more now, should we, who have been cleansed not just externally, but internally, offer our whole lives up to God as an offering to him? How much more should our whole lives then be committed to be a testimony to the Lord's work in our lives. The Apostle Paul even commands this in Romans 12:1, saying, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

To offer your life as an offering to God means that you realize that you ultimately belong to God. You are his. You are his special possession, and so you live like that. In everything that you do, you seek to find ways to more faithfully obey him, to keep his commandments, to do the work that he has set out for the church to do. You do not seek to gratify your old sinful desires, but you say, Christ's purpose is my purpose. May the Lord's will be my will. It means you devote your time, energy, and money, to Christ's service. At your work, you say, as I serve my employer, let me serve the company as unto the Lord. The same is true for your home, or your school, or whatever arena you find yourself in, look to how you can ultimately be serving God in that place. Do everything for God's glory, not for your own.

And as you offer your life as offering to the Lord, may it indeed be a testimony to others around you. People certainly noticed the cleansing of the leper in our passage. People will notice an individual who is transformed by the cleansing grace of Jesus. Use those opportunities to point to Jesus. Say, he is the one who cleanses me. He is the one who draws me near to God.

And the second response to the gospel which I propose is this: Respond by your willing bearing of the reproach of Christ. Respond by your willing bearing of the reproach of Christ. What I mean is this. In our passage we saw how Christ bore our shame on the cross. We saw that in the Hebrews 13 passage as well, which talked about how Christ suffered outside the camp for us. And Hebrews 13:13 goes on to say, "Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach." On the cross, Christ identified with us, with our shame, with our reproach. Now, in response, let us in turn bear the reproach of Christ.

You see, by being identified with Christ, we are necessarily identified with his reproach. The world crucified him, because they hated him. When we were part of the world, we too hated Jesus. But now that Jesus has cleansed us, we love Jesus. And now that means that the world will hate us, just like it hated Jesus. As a Christian, there have probably been times in your life where you have especially known this to be true. And yet there have probably been times where you haven't experienced much of this reproach from the world. And often that's because we try find ways to avoid the reproach of Christ. We try to water down the gospel, so it doesn't offend. We try to explain our differences with others in ways that are less offensive.

But may we not hide from the reproach of Christ. Let us boldly testify to the truth of the gospel, even if that means that the world will hate us, even if that means that the reproach of Christ will come upon us. Christ willingly took our shame on the cross, he willingly died on the cross that we would be clean. Let us willingly pick up our crosses as his disciples, and not being afraid to be persecuted for his sake.

For saints, may we be encouraged, for though in this world we may bear the reproach of Christ, know that we have been made clean. And so we no longer need to fear the wrath of God who will one day come with his purifying fire to do away with all evil and sin. But instead, we are his cleansed people, made clean by the blood of the lamb. Though our sins were as scarlet, we have been made clean, white as snow. May we in response offer our whole lives in service to him, bearing his reproach in this world, but looking forward to his return. On that day, we will realize the full benefits of being declared clean, for all eternity. Amen.

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