

Mark 1:40-45, Jesus Makes Clean

"40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.' 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I will; be clean.' 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.' 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter."

I. The Tragic Condition of Leprosy

1. **Modern Use of the Term, "Leprosy"** - "What is today called "leprosy" is "a chronic disease caused by infection with an acid-fast bacillus of the genus *Mycobacterium* (*M. Leprae*) and characterized by the formation of nodules on the surface of the body and especially on the face."⁽¹⁾ In 2008 a genetically distinct *Mycobacterium* was discovered that also causes leprosy, called the *Mycobacterium Lepromatosis*.⁽²⁾ Leprosy is also known as "Hansen's Disease," named after the Norwegian medical scientist Gerhard H. A. Hansen (1841-1912), who first identified the cause of the disease.⁽³⁾

2. **Biblical Language** - "Hebrew *šāra'at*, translated as *lepra* in the LXX, is explicitly used in the detailed legislation of Leviticus 13-14 to cover a variety of human diseases, carefully distinguished, together with mold on fabrics and on the wall of a house. (*Lepra* was similarly used in classical Greek of a variety of human, animal, and tree diseases, and also, for example, of mold on a vinegar bottle.) None of these conditions is identifiable with Hansen's disease. Whether or not Hansen's disease existed in ancient Israel is disputed. The biblical terms, where they refer to human diseases, probably cover psoriasis, lupus, ringworm and favus."⁽⁴⁾

"The Hebrew term *tsara'at* covers other skin diseases besides leprosy, including boils (Lev. 13:8), burns (Lev. 13:24), itches, ringworm, and scalp conditions. Scribes counted as many as seventy-two different afflictions that were defined as leprosy."⁽⁵⁾

Some newer translations, in lieu of the variety of conditions encompassed by the term, and the difference between these conditions and what we today call "leprosy", have dropped the term in favor of other options: "skin disease" (CEB, NCV), "virulent skin disease" (NJB), "serious skin disease" (GW), "dreaded skin disease" (GNT). Some other modern translations keep the term but insert a footnote indicating that the term covers various skin diseases (CSB, NABRE, NIV). David Garland suggests, "The translation 'scale disease' rather than 'leprosy' is more accurate."⁽⁶⁾

3. **Leprosy and Sin** - Leprosy was often seen as divine punishment; consequently, the disease could only be healed by the same. In Num. 12, Miriam attempted a leadership coup against her brother Moses and was stricken with leprosy by the Lord (Num. 12:10). When the Syrian king sent his General Naaman to the king of Israel to be healed of leprosy, the king responded, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?" (2 Kings 5:7). In the Levitical teaching on leprosy (Lev. 13-14), there is no suggested treatment, only laws to identify and keep the leprous person separate from the community and how to tell if the person has been cured and is ready for ritual purification and readmission into the community.

"In the time of Jesus, leprosy was viewed as the classic punishment for sin. It was the telltale sign that the sufferer was a culprit who had committed sins unknown to his neighbors ... Jesus can heal the man of his leprosy, understood as a smiting by God because of sin, by virtue of his authorization to forgive sins."⁽⁷⁾

“In the Old Testament, leprosy is sometimes seen as a punishment for sin, so Mark is probably telling a story not only about Jesus’ ability to heal but also about his authority to forgive.”⁽⁸⁾

“The spiritual reality for all of us is that we are spiritual lepers! This is what the image is meant to teach us. But unlike the leper, we are often unconscious of our sin and the pervasiveness of our sinful condition.”⁽⁹⁾

4. Leprosy and Death - Leprosy was seen as akin to death in its implications for ceremonial pollution. A passage from the first-century Roman-Jewish historian Josephus is an example of this.

“And for the lepers, he [Moses] suffered them not to come into the city at all, nor to live with any others, *as if they were in effect dead persons*; but if any one had obtained by prayer to God, the recovery from that distemper, and had gained a healthful complexion again, such a one returned thanks to God, with several sorts of sacrifices.”⁽¹⁰⁾

In the ancient Rabbinical texts there is a saying that the healing of a leper is as difficult as the raising of the dead.⁽¹¹⁾

5. Leprosy and Uncleaness - While most modern readers understand this story through the lens of the modern Western medical science with which they are familiar, the perspective of Mark and his original audience was entirely different. The story should be understood against the backdrop of the Old Testament laws of ritual purity, the bulk of which are found in Leviticus 11-16. Such laws regarding diet, childbirth, disease, bodily discharges, etc. have in common the idea of conforming to the “normalcy” of the original creation. Things that do not conform are to be avoided, including death, certain diseases, deformity, non-conformity to purpose or type (normal = cloven-footed animals that part the hoof are supposed to chew cud, so no bacon!), or mixing what God created to be separate (e.g., Deut. 22:11, “You shall not wear cloth of wool [animal kingdom] and linen [plant kingdom] mixed together”).

Having no knowledge of the microbial world, the idea was rather that there must be separation between that which is unclean and that which is clean (and especially that which is holy). Any unclean thing or person must be avoided; contact with uncleaness spreads the defilement.

Accordingly, there were laws that effectively locked a leprous person out of community life:

45 “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)

II. The Faith of the Leper

1. He had Heard About Jesus - The leper had obviously heard about Jesus, and this is not surprising, for earlier in the chapter we read, “And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee” (Mark 1:28).

2. Hope in Messiah - One of the wonders that was expected to accompany the Messiah was that the lepers would be cleansed (Matt. 11:2-6). This man believed that Jesus had that power. Remember that earlier we learned that it was also believed that only God can heal leprosy.

3. Faith in Messiah - “If you will, you can make me clean.” - He doubted not the power nor the divine authority of Jesus to cleanse him from his sins and disease. The urgency of the leper’s plea is brought to the foreground by

use of the historical present: "Then a leper comes up to him, pleads with him, falls down on his knees and says to him, 'If you want to, you can make me clean' (Scholars Bible).⁽¹²⁾

4. **Submission to Messiah** - The man knelt before Jesus, in a posture of worshipful submission. He did not come demanding or deserving, but pleading for mercy and grace.

III. The Reaction of Jesus

1. **Was Jesus Full of Pity or Anger?** - A textual discrepancy occurs here, one of those few in the Bible in which the meaning seems to be one opposite the other:

"Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I will; be clean.'" (ESV)	"Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!'" (NIV (2011 rev.)).
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Most English translations have something like the ESV in the right column. The old NIV read, "Filled with compassion, Jesus..." In the 2011 revision, the NIV was changed to "Jesus was indignant" to reflect the growing acceptance of that reading among scholars. A couple other modern translations also go this route ("Jesus was moved to anger; he stretched out his hand...", REB; "Incensed, Jesus reached out his hand...", CEB).

The latter reading has been gaining ground because it is thought to be more logical that a scribe would feel compelled to change angry Jesus to compassionate Jesus than the opposite way. Also, the parallel passages in Matthew 8:2-4 and Luke 5:11-16 do not mention Jesus filled with compassion. It is thought that they (assuming that these gospels were written after Mark and also that they used Mark as a source) would not have omitted the compassion of Jesus, but would probably have omitted his anger. Also, in the sentences following, Jesus "sternly" ordered the leper to stay quiet, and the word translated "sent him away" is probably too mild, being the same word used for Jesus "casting out" the demons.

However, the manuscript evidence is far superior for the traditional reading in which Jesus is moved with pity or compassion. The traditional reading is also consistent with the emotion Jesus displayed at other times when confronted with the tragic human condition (think of the death of Lazarus: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35)). It is also worth noting that in the language of Jesus (Aramaic), the word for "pity" (*ethraham*) is one letter-change away from "enraged" (*ethra'em*) (yes, it's a two-letter change when transliterated into English, but in Aramaic it is only one letter). It is possible this may somehow have caused the variant early in the copying history of the gospel.

2. **Cleansed by Touch** - Any other person would have been made unclean by touching the leper, without affecting the leper at all. But Jesus, the only one who can fully deal with our sin and all its consequence, not only did not become impure himself, he cleansed the leper, who was healed "immediately"! The priests could not cleanse a leper, the law could only call for his ostracism, but Jesus could and did make him whole again and ready to be restored to the community.

3. **Show the Priest** - Though Jesus had fully restored the man, he wouldn't have been accepted by his community without being examined and pronounced clean according to the law. Jesus' superiority to the priests sets up later conflicts, even as Jesus' superiority to the scribes earlier in the chapter looks ahead to conflict with the religious authorities, and ultimately, the Cross.

4. **Keep Quiet!** - Jesus sternly charged the man not to spread word of what had happened. He did not want a following of people seeking miracles and a meal. As noted in III.1 above, the language is very forceful.

IV. The Disobedience of the Cleansed Man

1. **An Immature Faith** - Clearly the leper had faith, but his faith was not yet solid. Probably he justified his desire to tell people: "Shouldn't Jesus get the credit for working such a wonder? Why, it wouldn't be fair to rob him of the

glory!” We don’t know what caused the man to disobey Jesus but we do know one thing: when men disobey God, they have some clever justification for it.

“Perhaps there is another reason Jesus spoke so forcefully to this man in particular. Did Jesus see that, despite his faith (v. 40), there was something unstable and immature about him? Did Jesus sense that he was just the kind of man who would blurt out every last detail of what had happened? In the event, the stern language proved to be all too appropriate, for the man did exactly what Jesus had urged him not to do. He was the epitome of the person who comes to Jesus for salvation, but then refuses to submit to Jesus because he believes he really knows best how to live his own life (and, alas, often thinks that he knows better than Jesus how to organize the kingdom of God!).”⁽¹³⁾

2. A Predictable Result - When we don’t do things God’s way, especially regarding our evangelism and discipleship, and the way we present God to the world in public worship, we risk temporarily retarding the progress of the true gospel in our sphere of influence:

“...as so often, the well-meaning enthusiasm of the healed man to tell his story curtailed the ministry of Jesus at that point.”⁽¹⁴⁾

“Disobedience to the express command of Christ, even if undertaken from the best possible motives, can only lead to a hampering and hindering of Christ’s work.”⁽¹⁵⁾

3. The Great Exchange - Interestingly, it was formerly the leper who was unable to enter a town, but was out in the desolate places. Now Christ is put in the place of the leper because of the latter’s sinful disobedience. And what a picture of the work of our Savior, cleansing us so we can reunite with family and friends, and go to synagogue and temple again and worship God! And Jesus remains out in the cursed desert for us, because of our iniquity. Our sins laid on him, our scapegoat wanders the desert to carry them far away from us. And with but a touch we are made righteous because he is able to make us clean.

Notes

1. Pilch, John J. Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology, p. 156.
2. Wikipedia: Mycobacterium Lepromatosis.
3. Wikipedia: Gerhard Armauer Hansen.
4. Green, McKnight, and Marshall, eds. Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship, p. 463.
5. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 67.
6. Garland, David E. A Theology of Mark’s Gospel, p. 109.
7. Garland, David E. Mark [NIV Application Commentary], pp. 82-83.
8. Twelftree, Graham H. Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study, p. 61.
9. Hughes, R. Kent. Mark, Volume One: Jesus, Servant and Savior [Preaching the Word], p. 55.
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12. Schmidt, Daryl D. The Gospel of Mark [The Scholars Bible, Vol. 1], p. 51.
13. Ferguson, Sinclair. Let’s Study Mark!, p. 22.
14. English, Donald. The Message of Mark [The Bible Speaks Today], p. 63.
15. Cole, R. Alan. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 2], p. 64.