

## Trading Places

Luke 5:12-16

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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Leprosy. Even in our day the word is enough to send a little shiver up the spine. But in Jesus' day.... Some translations try to soften it a little by calling it "a skin disease." Perhaps that's a little easier to take. But in Bible times there was nothing that could soften the horror of the disease—leprosy.

Luke tells us about a man who came to Jesus. The man had leprosy. And the Jewish law was very clear about how someone with leprosy was to be treated. In that day, leprosy was thought to be a highly contagious disease. The Old Testament law declared that anyone with leprosy was unclean. They were not allowed to have contact with anyone—even their loved ones. They were not allowed to go to worship, not allowed to live around others who did not have the disease. If they ever were in the vicinity of others, they had to keep their mouth covered at all times and they had to call out "Unclean, unclean" so that others could give them wide passage and not run the risk of accidentally touching them.

The Jewish Talmud said, "These four are accounted as dead—the blind, the leper, the poor and the childless." If you had leprosy you were as good as dead.

You may remember a scene from the movie "Ben Hur" about a mother who had contracted leprosy. You probably know that the movie, which is best known for that wonderful chariot race scene, is based on the book of the same name by Lew Wallace. In the book here is how he describes the disease of leprosy.

To be a leper was to be treated as dead—to be excluded from the city as a corpse; to be spoken to by the best beloved and most loving only at a distance; to dwell with none but lepers; to be utterly unprivileged; to be denied the rites of the Temple and the synagogue; to go about in torn garments and with covered mouth, except when crying, "Unclean, unclean!", to find home in the wilderness or abandoned tombs, afraid to die, but without hope except in death.

The book continues the story of this mother who had leprosy and how it affected her and her relationship to her family, especially the son that she loved so much:

Slowly, steadily, with horrible certainty, the disease spread. It bleached her head white, ate holes in her lips and eyelids, covered her body with scales, made her voice shrill. At each advance it made the sufferer more loathsome; and so it would continue until death, which might be years before her.

The old happy life could never be again. If she went near the house [she] called home, it would be to stop at the gate and cry, "Unclean, unclean." She must go about with the yearnings of love alive in her breast, strong as ever, and more sensitive even, because return in kind could never be again. The son of whom she constantly thought, and with all sweet promises such as mothers find purest

delight in, must at meeting her stand afar off. If he held out his hands to her, and called, "Mother, mother," for very love of him she must answer, "Unclean, unclean." (Wallace, *Ben Hur*, Book 6, chapter 2).

The disease itself was bad enough, but the isolation and loneliness that accompanied it must have made it almost unbearable.

Yet the law was very clear about this. You can read it in Leviticus:

When a man has on the skin of his body a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin, the priest shall examine him and pronounce him unclean. The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his mouth and cry, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp (Leviticus 13:2-3, 45-46).

The disease of leprosy was a death sentence—not only did the sufferer have to endure the disease itself, but because of it was denied everything that makes life worth living.

One day Jesus was in the city when a man who had leprosy called out, "If you want to, you can make me clean." Now maybe I'm reading a little too much into this man's comment, but it sounds a little cynical to me. "If you want to—which I'm sure you don't because nobody wants to have anything to do with people like me...." It makes you wonder what kind of abuse this man had endured at the hands of society. How often had he heard people say to him, "Get out of here, leper. Get back to the caves where you belong. Nobody wants you around here."?

"If you want to, you can make me clean," this man with leprosy said to Jesus. And Jesus replied, "I do want to, be clean." And with that Jesus touched the man. Touched him! How long had it been since this man had felt the touch of another human being? How long had it been since he had heard a word spoken to him with such compassion and love? "I do want to," Jesus said. And Jesus touched him.

Now I don't think that Jesus had to touch this leper in order to cure him of his disease. Throughout the gospels there are lots of other examples of Jesus' curing someone with just a word. Jesus didn't have to touch this leper to cure him of the disease. But he did.

Back to Leviticus again. The law was clear: "If anyone touches an unclean thing, he becomes unclean" (Leviticus 5:2). So by touching this unclean leper, Jesus makes himself unclean. In that moment of healing, the leper is cured of his disease and is told to go to the priest who will declare him now clean...but Jesus has now become unclean.

The leper has been made clean by Jesus who took on himself the leper's uncleanness. The one who was dead is now alive because Jesus made the leper's pain and humiliation and shame his pain and humiliation and shame.

At the beginning of this story one is clean and one is unclean. At the end of the story one is clean and one is unclean...except now they had traded places.

I think in this encounter between Jesus and the leper you can see Jesus' whole ministry summed up in just a few verses. Jesus comes to the one who is as good as dead, takes that person's burden upon himself, and in so doing makes that person alive.

Here's the way we heard it in the Old Testament reading:

Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
He was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
Upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed (Isaiah 53:4-5).

This story that we read is not just a story about an isolated encounter between Jesus and a leper. This is really a story about Jesus' touching us. You and I are that leper. We are the persons whose sins have made us as good as dead. We are the ones who cannot bear the pain and humiliation and shame of our sin. So Jesus comes to us and says to us, "I declare you clean." There's a verse in the little book of Jude that says that through Jesus we are made to be "without blemish" (v. 24). He takes on himself our sin; he bears our pain and suffering; he carries our sin with him to the cross. The one who was without sin became sin for us so that by his death, we might have life.

The story of the encounter between Jesus and this leper ends with Jesus' telling the leper not to tell anyone what had happened. I don't guess we should be too surprised that the leper disobeyed and told everyone he met about what Jesus had done for him. Could he have done anything else? Of course he talked, told his story, and recounted how it happened—how Jesus touched him and made him whole.

Is it possible for you to receive such a gift of new life and then keep it to yourself?✠