

# “What Difference Does Our Faith Make?”

Mark 1:40-45

2/13/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

We aren't as familiar with the disease leprosy in our culture because it exists only in remote parts of developing countries. We know more about cancer and heart disease but leprosy, in the time of Christ, was an incurable disease that devastated the body and the mind.

There are three kinds of Leprosy but whoever was the victim died a horrible death. For years, your body would turn on itself and you would be covered with open ulcerations all over your body. This autoimmune type of disease would turn your outer skin into something like gray shoe leather. Your central nervous system would gradually erode so you had no feeling anywhere on your body.

In one of the forms of leprosy, your fingers, toes, then your hands and feet would fall off after months of no circulation. Depending on the type with which you were afflicted, within 7 to twenty years, you'd become insane, then comatose and then, mercifully, you would die. It appears that the ancient character Job had leprosy, judging by the description in that Old Testament book.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The first is the nodular or tubercular kind. It starts by causing pains in the joints and then later on, usually on the back, symmetrical discolored patches or blotches appear. On these discolored patches appear little nodules that are pink but later turn brown. The skin becomes thickened and the nodules begin to appear on the face and nose, lips and forehead. A person's entire appearance is changed so that the victim ends up looking like a wrinkly-faced lion. As the nodules grow larger, they ulcerate and ooze and the eyebrows fall out, the eye sockets become staring. The voice becomes hoarse and the breathing begins to wheeze because of ulcers getting in the vocal chords. The poor person's hands and feet ulcerate until she or he slowly becomes a mass of ulcerated growths all over. The average length of this form of the disease is nine years and it ends in mental decay, coma and death.

The second form of the disease attacks the nervous system. When a part of the body gets leprosy of this kind, the infected area loses all feeling or sensation. The victim doesn't know they are burned or scalded until after the fact. Like the first form of the disease, the attack on the nervous system causes colored patches and blisters on the skin. Muscles waste away and tendons contract until the hands become like claws. The feet and hands become progressively so ulcerated that fingers and toes,

In addition to the horrors of this shattering physical, psychological and emotional suffering in having leprosy, the victims in Judaism were made social outcasts. They had to live outside the village, away from everyone else. Old Testament laws stipulated that lepers had to wear torn and ripped clothing, go with their head uncovered (to show they had the disease) and wear a cloth over their upper lip and nose. Everywhere they went, they had to call out to others “unclean” as a warning. So with these things in mind, as we say a prayer of gratitude that we do not have leprosy, let's look at this instance where Jesus healed a man who was a leper.

In your bulletin, you see Matthew, Mark and Luke have their own versions of this healing incident. As we go through it, we can spot a few small details that show us the personal interests of these writers.

Matthew, in the left column, says that this happened after Jesus came down from a mountainside. He's talking about when Jesus finished what he called “The Sermon on the Mount” in his editing of the collection of Jesus' core teaching lessons. Luke, in comparison, says that this happened when Jesus was in one of the cities. Mark, as you know, wrote his gospel first and the two others had a copy of his work on their desks when they wrote their own. He doesn't say anything about the place where this healing occurred. Mark included this story not so much for the sake of a biography of Jesus but to quickly give an illustration that Jesus had the power over the disease.

If you look a little further down in the story, in Mark's verse 41, he says Jesus was “moved with pity.” Luke and Matthew don't have that. Mark usually tends to put emotional detail in his writing. And if you look at his verse 43, Mark has Jesus

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hands and feet fall off. This second form of the disease takes about 20 to 30 years before death.

The third kind of leprosy is the commonest of all – when the nodular and nervous system attack combine. In the first century, the term leprosy was used to cover a lot of other skin diseases, some of them were psoriasis and other rashes. Ringworm was considered leprosy by the people in Jesus' time and is still common in the East.

“sternly” charging the healed man – “sending him away at once” – that urgency is found only in Mark’s version. So we can, at least, see that Mark shows Jesus to be Someone with strong emotions – and this is continually appearing in Mark’s account.

All three gospel writers have Jesus touching the man and healing him. When we think of the purity regulations in Judaism, it is impressive that Jesus reaches out and touches someone with that rotting leprosy disease. But Jesus usually disregarded these Jewish regulations in order to heal someone.

In verse 43 of Mark, where Jesus tells the man not to tell anyone about this healing, we see over to the left in Matthew that Jesus told the man to keep it a secret. Matthew simply copied what Mark had written. And in reading through all of the book of Mark, we notice that he is intrigued that Jesus tried to keep His identity a secret to avoid a popularity that would ruin His chance to minister to more people. Remember in last week’s text, in the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, Jesus instructed an exorcized demon to keep quiet because He didn’t want that spirit to tell everyone of His divinity. So Mark, as an individual, was interested in how Jesus supposedly tried to keep a low profile in order to avoid the crowds and the popularity.

Another thing that happens in this event is that Jesus tells the healed man to go and show himself to the priest, then go through all the purification ritual sacrifices at the temple. It was an elaborate procedure to be declared “clean” by the priests. It involved a week of physical examinations and altar sacrifices. But if the priests declared that man to be ritually clean and cured – they would also be verifying that Jesus had actually cured him. So we don’t know what happened after this. It would have put the priests in a bind by appearing to certify a miracle had been performed by Jesus.

In his verse 45, Mark says that despite Jesus’ instructions, the cured man went out and told everyone about it. Luke, over on the right column, shows that the report of the incident just spread all around. But Mark seems to show the man spreading things around – maybe because of what was said in his verse 43.

Remember Mark noted that Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once. That’s strong language. It could be that Jesus knew the man was going to disobey Him and out of a sense of rebuke, Jesus was displeased with the fact that the man was probably going to tell everyone anyway. *TV dinners rather than a banquet, as we mentioned in the children’s sermon.*

The result of this, in verse 45 of Mark, is that Jesus couldn’t openly go into a town after that. He was getting too popular so He had to stay out in the rural parts and yet people flocked to Him there.

Notice, briefly, over in the Luke column to the right, in his verse 16, he says Jesus withdrew to the wilderness and prayed. Luke is the only one who has that. Luke considered the rural areas to be geographically in the wilderness – but he also had an interest in the prayer life of Jesus. So here, and several other places throughout Luke, he (alone) mentions Jesus praying.

So after looking through some of the detail of these passages, what are some of the main things that emerge from Mark’s consideration of the story?

Mark showed how Jesus wasn’t like a priest who would merely inspect someone to see *if* the disease was healed – Jesus *healed* the man. Jesus had the power and authority over disease because He was God.

In fact, so far in Mark, he has shown us that Jesus had the authority over the truth – He taught with authority and the people marveled. Jesus had authority over demons and continually, throughout Mark, drove out demons. He was more powerful than any supernatural spirit. And Mark showed us in the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law that Jesus had authority over disease, such as fevers. And here, Jesus heals leprosy – the most dreaded disease of His times.

We also see that when Jesus touched the man and healed him, the man simply couldn’t keep it a secret and we could hardly blame him. But we might ask ourselves this morning, if Jesus is really Who He is, what is that to us? Has God worked any healing in our lives or change in our relationships with others – or are we just the same as we’ve always been?

Has Jesus changed anything in our lives? If so, are we actually telling others about the things for which we are grateful?

Sometimes people have to recover from a life-threatening disease in the hospital before they get seriously in touch with their faith in God. Sometimes we can get so busy with our work, our household responsibilities and our leisure time activities – that we never take the time to get in touch with the difference our faith has made in our life.

We're good neighbors. We're diligent workers in the home or at the plant or office and even in our volunteer associations. But we are often astoundingly silent when we are with another person who becomes curious about matters pertaining to God and Christ.

Those of you who have spent some time in Europe, or other cultures, have found you experienced culture shock when you came back into our country. From being away from it, you were shocked to notice how life here is so much more rushed, noisy and clogged with gadgets and material things, for better or worse. From being away and coming back, you may have found a new perspective on your own lifestyle.

Similarly, going away to college and leaving home brings a tremendous change in a person – it usually accelerates personal growth and maturity. In Thomas Wolf's book *You Can't Go Home Again*, he discusses how his home could never again be the limits and measure of his life's view – just as returning college students or service people realize today.

Likewise, once we become Christians, we realize that the predominant world's values *should* no longer bind us and shape us or determine our ultimate concerns. We experience a freedom from having to conform to the cover models of the popular checkout counter magazines or those image makers on television.

The first difference our faith should make is a change in our perspective. Our horizons do not have to be limited to the dull dead-ends of our society which pretend there is no Personal God Who sees what we are doing with our lives.

Jesus told the man to go ahead and show himself to the religious establishment and get recognized as a "ritually" clean person. In a sense, Jesus was telling

the man to go ahead and show the religious leaders that he is one whom they should consider being worthy of love.

At the same time, however, it was Jesus Who touched lepers, healed on the Sabbath and forgave sinners – all in direct violation of the sanctioned religious power structure. So Jesus was showing that His authority and power rose well above conventional religious authorities. Jesus did not cancel the law but fulfilled it.

Our faith and action should not only find a religious expression within the tradition of a particular denomination – but also be open to be receptive to the faith of other people – sometimes expressing itself in Catholic, Methodist, Baptist or other traditions. But wherever we worship, our faith should be making a difference in our personal and career life. If we know Christ to be our life's number one priority, then those whom we meet should somehow realize, just from being with us, that Jesus wasn't merely some dynamic personality or brilliant teacher in ancient history – but was, and is, God in our lives.

What difference has your faith in Christ made in your life? As you're sitting here, this morning, for the few remaining minutes before leaving, reflect about this past week if you will. What has God been to you this week? Where was God in the recent days as you went through all of this week's activities? In all the minutes and hours that have transpired this week, with all that you've had on your mind – your busyness . . . the things that just engulfed your schedule, . . . the rushing or in times of relaxation, . . . did you sense, in any way, that God was right there beside you?

Perhaps you've had times, recently, when you've felt that everything in your life has come together and is working like never before. That your work and leisure and relationships are in balance and in many ways, almost compliment one another. You're "in your game" and you're doing the best you can in what you do and who you are in other people's lives.

On the other hand, maybe you've had spans of time when you've felt pretty insignificant. You might have had times when you've felt overwhelmed with a sense of fear of the future or even felt remorse over things in your past that you can't go back and redo. You have felt loneliness and unconnected from others

– maybe abandoned and without a sense of genuine belonging.

I know some of you have felt tremendous pain and sadness to the extent that you actually thought you would die from feeling so low. And then time passed and you didn't die and yet you have come to feel the same plummeting despair.

Some of you may have gone the entire week and never once thought about God having anything to do with your life.

The healing aspect of life, in all of your joy and sadness, is that God never forgets about you. You are never out of God's sight. Frankly and with stark truthfulness, God is watching you right now, in this very moment, as you are sitting on these hard pews, . . . even though your mind is filled with a thousand things other than this church service.

This is the difference our faith makes. God is a personal God Who loves you just as you are – with no conditions, ifs, ands or buts. The way you are right now – all of you, to the core of your essence deep inside you.

God loves you as a personality which involves every part of your physical presence, your emotional, intellectual and your inner spirit. It's not the *things* you fearfully hide behind for safety. It's not the *facades*, the *work* which you use to surround yourself. It's not *what you produce* and it's not the *barriers* you throw up to protect you from people from whom you fear harm.

It's you whom God totally loves. No one and no circumstance will ever shake that unconditional love. ■

### Gospel Reading in Parallel Mark 1:40-45

Matthew 8:1-4	Mark 1:40-45	Luke 5:12-16	John
<p><sup>1</sup> When He came down from the mountain, great crowds followed Him; <sup>2</sup> and behold, a leper came to Him and knelt before Him, saying, "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean." <sup>3</sup> And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.</p> <p><sup>4</sup> And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to the people."</p>	<p><sup>40</sup> And a leper came to Him beseeching Him, and kneeling said to Him, "If You will, you can make me clean." <sup>41</sup> Moved with pity, He stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." <sup>42</sup> And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. <sup>43</sup> And He <i>sternly</i> charged him, and set him away at once, <sup>44</sup> 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 the people." <sup>45</sup> 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</p>	<p><sup>12</sup> While He was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and besought Him, "Lord, if you will, You can make me clean." <sup>13</sup> And He stretched out his hand, and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him.</p> <p><sup>14</sup> And he charged him to tell no one; but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to the people."</p> <p><sup>15</sup> But so much the more the report went abroad concerning Him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. <sup>16</sup> But He withdrew to the</p>	