

THE CLEANSING OF THE LEPER

By Charles C. Ryrie, Th. D., Ph. D.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law in Capernaum was followed rapidly by a sequence of events which led to the miracle of the cleansing of a leper (Matt. 8:2-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16). That evening after Peter's mother-in-law was healed, the whole city gathered at Peter's door to beseech the Savior for deliverance from various maladies. It had already been a busy day, but the Lord healed many of them (Mark 1:32-34). In spite of His weariness of body, the next day He arose early to seek His Father's face in prayer but His disciples found Him and reported that many others back in town were seeking Him. Our Lord's reply was to remind them of the many others in other towns who also needed Him.

I. THE LEPROSY OF THE MAN

It was while the Lord was on this preaching tour through Galilee that a leper accosted Him. Leprosy is one of the oldest diseases known to man, for the Egyptians recognized it before 1500 B. C. It was evidently not at all uncommon in Palestine in Jesus' day (cf. Matt. 10:8; 11:5; Luke 7:22), but this incident is the first record of cleansing in Christ's public ministry.

The characteristics of leprosy. Leprosy is a disease which seems to know no climatic or social boundaries. Although today's three million lepers are found chiefly in tropical Africa, South America, India, and China, the disease has appeared and does appear in all parts of the world. "Race, occupation, social status and climate have no bearing on the incidence" (John M. Musser, *Internal Medicine*, 4th edition, 1945, p. 73).

Leprosy appears in two forms. One affects the nerves
(262)

and the other the skin. It is the latter which seems to be the type spoken of everywhere in the Bible, but neither type is a disease of the blood. The bacilli appear in the blood only during times of fever (*ibid.*, p. 74; cf. C. I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 141: "Leprosy speaks of sin as (1) in the blood. . ."). A person may harbor the germs for years before the disease erupts. When it does appear, however, it takes the form of nodules or of swelling of the extremities and usually affects the face, legs, or feet first. From then on the disease runs a fearful and sometimes lengthy course. "As the nodules enlarge the skin becomes deeply furrowed; the ear lobes, lips and nose become thickened, tending to cause resemblance to a lion's face. . . [the skin] is often dusky or 'muddy,' dry or scaling. The nails are often striated. Ulcerations occur easily. Ulcers may heal, but often penetrate deeply and spread, causing appalling mutilation. Various digits may drop off. . . . Destruction of the cornea and conjunctiva results in blindness" (*ibid.*, p. 75; cf. also Sir Henry L. Tidy, *A Synopsis of Medicine*, 9th edition, 1949, p. 137).

The Jews evidently regarded the disease as contagious though it is not readily so. Methods of arresting the disease have been known for some time, and modern drugs can eliminate the germs from the body, but nothing can undo the toll the disease takes upon a body before it is either arrested or cured. These are the general characteristics of leprosy.

The consequences of leprosy. In the Old Testament certain very specific tests were given for the diagnosing of leprosy (Lev. 13). When it was discovered the afflicted person was rigidly cut off from the community. He was compelled to put on the marks of mourning as if he were dead. He had his clothes rent, his head uncovered, his lips covered, and wherever he went he had to shout "unclean" in order to warn others away (Lev. 13:45; Num. 12:12). Often a separate place was designated in the synagogues for lepers, and infraction of any of these regulations of separation was punishable with forty stripes.

It is these consequences that have caused leprosy to be regarded as a type of sin. Actually the nearest Biblical reference which would justify this type is Psalm 51:7 ("Purge me with hyssop"). Because the hyssop mentioned here is also a part of the cleansing ritual for the leper (Lev. 14:4), it is assumed that David's sin is being compared to leprosy and thus leprosy is a type of sin. In reality, David may more likely have had in mind the hyssop used in the ritual of cleansing in connection with the red heifer offering (Num. 19:18), and thus it seems doubtful at best to speak of leprosy as a distinct type. It can, however, certainly be considered as an illustration of some aspects of sin. Principally leprosy illustrates the defilement of sin which results in separation. Insidiousness, loathsomeness, uncleanness, separation, defilement, death, are all points of comparison between leprosy and sin, but resemblance does not constitute leprosy a type--only an illustration.

II. THE LOVE OF THE MASTER

The way the leper approached the Lord gives indication of his great faith in the power of Christ. "If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean." It was the love of Christ that motivated His action in this instance as in all His work, but it was love related to power. I might love to give each reader a million dollars but I am not able to do so. The Lord of glory not only loved this man and us but He was and is able to do something about his and our miserable condition. Salvation is not only related to the truth that "He loved the world" but also to the truth that "He is able."

However, love and power are not enough; there must be willingness, and the form in which the leper's question was cast shows that he recognized this fact. The question was not, Could He do it? but, Would He do it? "There might be the ability without the will, or the will without the ability, but his hope was that in Christ there would be the combination of both, and all that was needed for that, in his estimation, was the will" (William M. Taylor, *The Miracles of Our*

Saviour, p. 114).

Thus powerful and willing love resulted in active love, and the Savior touched the leper. The act of touching the defiled man, which normally would also have defiled the one who touched him, illustrates the deep mystery involved in the Savior's identifying Himself with sin. Who can fathom all that may be involved in the fact that He was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21)? And yet this touching of the leper may illustrate something of that mystery.

III. THE LAW OF MOSES

After the cleansing came the command: "See thou say nothing to any man: but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them" (Mark 1:44). "Those things which Moses commanded" are recorded in Leviticus 14. Briefly, the ritual of cleansing was as follows: two clean living birds, a cedar rod, scarlet, and hyssop were taken; one bird was then killed in an earthen vessel over running water; the hyssop was then tied to the rod with the scarlet band and it and the living bird were dipped in the blood of the dead bird; next the blood on the rod was sprinkled over the leper seven times, and the living bird was loosed. At this point the leper was pronounced clean, but more was still required of him. He had to wash his clothes, shave, bathe, stay away from his house for seven days, repeat the ablutions and shaving, and finally on the eighth day offer at the temple a sin offering, a trespass offering, a meal offering, and a burnt offering. It is evident that the law was very detailed about this procedure, and doubtless, because it had seldom if ever been used, there would have been a lot of scratching of priestly heads had the leper obeyed the Lord and gone to them. Instead, he chose to disobey and publish his miracle abroad so that it actually hindered his benefactor's ministry.

The power of the law. Certain important doctrinal facts about the relation of the Savior, the sinner, and the Mosaic

law are illustrated in this miracle. The first is that the Mosaic law was powerless to cleanse. It could after a length time pronounce as true the fact that a man was cleansed, it could not perform the cleansing itself. The nature of law has not changed; it still cannot cleanse the sinner matter how admirably he may try to keep its "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh justified in his sight" (Rom. 3:20). It was never given as a means of spiritual salvation, and great is the error of who so use it today.

The purpose of the law. The Lord's reason for commanding this leper to go to the priests was that the law might be used as a testimony to them. In the process performing the ritual of the law they might have been led to the Savior. Such is a legitimate purpose of the preaching of the law today. It may be used to lead a man to Christ. It is for the unrighteous (1 Tim. 1:9), to shut him up to faith in Christ (Gal. 3:23-24). Our Lord used it this way (Luke 10:25-37) and so may we.

Although the law may be used to show a sinner his hopeless condition, only Christ can save. What then is the place of the law in the life of the redeemed? Being saved does not exempt one from lawful living, but the law involved is no longer the law of Moses but the law of Christ. So it was for the cleansed leper (Mark 1:44), and so it is for the cleansed sinner in this age (1 Cor. 9:21). He is no longer under any part of the Mosaic law (including the Ten Commandments, 2 Cor. 3:7-11), but he is to live by the commandments of Christ under grace.

But, someone will say, Are not many of the requirements of the law (and especially the principles of the Ten Commandments) repeated substantially in the teachings of grace? The answer is obviously yes. Then, one will say, Why insist that the Christian is not under the Mosaic law (including the Ten Commandments)? We insist on it for the evident reason that the Scripture says so (2 Cor. 3:7-11; Rom. 10:4; Heb. 7:11-12), and for the very practical reason that even though

some of the standards may be similar under law and grace, no one will ever possibly reach any of those standards in his life if he tries to do so by keeping the law. The law can only motivate to sin (Rom. 7) and never to sanctification. Legalism is the greatest enemy of sanctification; thus to connect the believer's sanctification with the law is to defeat him before he starts.

Love is the only workable motive for sanctification, but love does not mean license. No doubt, the leper was so overpowered with love for his deliverance and his deliverer that he thought he was doing right by telling everyone else of Jesus. But that was not real love, for if he had had genuine, thoughtful love he would have obeyed. The law of Christ is tailor-made and perfect in every detail. The love of Christ brings perfect obedience to each and all of those details. May the lessons of this miracle be practice in a life of obedience motivated by the love of the one who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Dallas, Texas

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary

3909 Swiss Ave.

Dallas, TX 75204

www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu