

Scripture: Leviticus 13:1-3, 45-46
Mark 1:40-45

Jesus Trades Places with a Leper

Beloved in Christ, it is common to trade places. Sometimes we trade places with someone at work. He takes my shift now and I will take his shift later. Students will exchange with other students for half a year. While one studies in Paris, the other studies in Toronto. They trade places.

Here in our text Jesus trades places with a leper. But there is no comparison in the exchange here. Our Bible passage begins with a leper on the outside. He lives in isolation. But how does our Bible passage end? Jesus is “outside in lonely places.” Jesus trades places with a leper. How He does so and why He does so we will come to know.

Keep in mind that the key verse of the entire book of Mark is 10:45: “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*” Christ came to serve and His service culminates in His sacrifice on the cross, giving His life for the sins of His people.

In light of Mark 1:40-45, God’s Word declares to us that Jesus, in His compassion, trades places with a leper. This pictures or points to a far greater exchange: Christ trading places with us on the cross so that we can be cleansed through His blood. We see

1. The cry for cleansing
2. The One who cleanses
3. The Testimony to His cleansing

The Cry for Cleansing [v.40]

Jesus has left the town of Capernaum. He was making His circuit all throughout Galilee, going to different towns, preaching in their synagogues.

Where He is at this point, we don’t know. The text does not say. But we read in verse 40 that “*a leper came to Him...*” That was just a ‘no,no’ for a leper to come near to anyone. It was a ‘no’ according to the law of Moses. It was a ‘no’ according to the custom of the day.

Leprosy was not only a horrible skin disease. It was a long-lasting disease with no known cure at that time. Spongy, tumor like swellings would grow on the face and body. The extremities of the body, the feet and fingers, the eye brows, chin, nose, ears became rotting flesh and parts would eventually fall off. Lepers would be isolated, placed in camps, away from society. People would bring food to them but they placed the food a distance away so that they had to get it.

The dread of this disease is reflected in Leviticus 13:45-46 where we read the law concerning leprosy, “*his clothes shall be torn and his head bare, and he shall cover his mustache, and cry,*

“Unclean! Unclean! He shall be unclean . . .and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

The disease was a curse. It took away the leper’s name, their occupation, their family, fellowship and the worshipping community. To make sure that no one would contact them they were required to make their appearance as disgusting as possible.

According to Luke’s gospel, this man who came to Jesus was “full of leprosy”[Luke 5:12]. He must have heard about Jesus. He found his way to Jesus! No obstacle stops him from coming to Jesus. With boldness he comes to Jesus in his need. This man risks everything: breaking every ritual law and custom. We read in verse 40, that he came to Jesus, *“imploing Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, ‘if You are willing, You can make me clean.’”*

Hear his cry. He sees his own wretched condition. See his humility: falling on his knees before the Christ. He is humble enough to ask for cleansing.

But one thing stands out in this unclean man: his faith! He shows his faith, overcoming every obstacle: ‘You can make me clean.’ He does not question Jesus’ ability to save him. Of Christ’s power, He is sure. But of His willingness, he is not sure: ‘if You are willing.’ He doesn’t doubt Christ’s ability but His willingness to cleanse him. Notice, there is no reference to healing here, but four references to cleansing!

Who else needs cleansing? We do. Leprosy is a picture of our sin and what sin does to us. It makes us unclean. We need cleansing. First, do we see it in ourselves and desire it like this man? Second, you may believe He has the power to cleanse, but perhaps like this man, seeing your own wretchedness, you question His willingness.

This brings us to the One who cleanses.

The One who Cleanses [vv.41-42]

Is Jesus willing? Or does He turn from the leper? After all, He is from heaven, the Son of God, who was with the Father from all eternity, holy and undefiled and separate from sinners [Hebrews 7:26]. His response is as surprising as the leper’s.

Rather than turning from the leper, Jesus turns to him; indeed, He touches him! Jesus brings Himself into full contact with the ritually untouchables! See verse 41, ***“Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand, and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.”*** This verse captures every move in slow motion. It tells us to spend time on these words.

Jesus *“was moved with compassion...”* The needy cry of this ritually unclean man evoked the pity of Christ. The sense is that He felt it in His stomach. We know what that is like. When we have a brother, sister or child who is really sick or his life is in danger, we feel it deep in the stomach. It was a gut-wrenching compassion.

His arm then crosses the line -- a line no one else had ever crossed. He touches him, removing every social, religious and physical barrier commanded by Moses and custom alike. The touch of Jesus speaks way louder than His words for all those who are seeing. But the words of Jesus touch the leper more deeply than anything else. Jesus is not only able; He is willing: *"I am willing,"* Jesus says, *"Be clean!"* See His power but also His love!

To the viewer, Jesus was willing to make Himself unclean [as they saw it] so that the leper might be made clean. The clear result, we read in verse 42, *"As soon as He [Jesus] had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed."* The cleansing was sudden and complete! Kent Hughes colorfully describes it in this way, "His feet – toeless, ulcerated stubs – were suddenly whole, bursting his shrunken sandals. The knobs of his hands grew fingers before his very eyes. Back came his hair, eyebrows, eyelashes. Under his hair were ears and before him a nose! His skin was supple and soft. Can you hear the man crying not, 'Unclean, unclean,' but 'I'm clean! I'm clean!'"

Normally the uncleanness would overpower the cleanness. It would pollute. But in this case, the cleanness overpowers the uncleanness. He is restored! Jesus removes it completely and suddenly, taking it all upon Himself. In Him, God's grace is stronger than sin. Life is stronger than death!

There is good news for us here. First, Jesus is able to cleanse and He is also willing to cleanse us of our sin. Never doubt His willingness. Don't come to Him with excuses. Come with faith, believing! No sin is a barrier, no sin is an obstacle for Christ. He is willing and able to cleanse. He is able and willing to restore us to a right relationship with God. Whosoever wills, let him come [Revelation 22:17]. 1 John 1:9 says, *"if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all [not some, or most] unrighteousness."*

Second, Jesus is showing that every Old Testament ritual law or custom of uncleanness is fulfilled in Him. He takes it upon Himself and brings it to the cross and overcomes it through His death and resurrection. The law cannot save; the law cannot make clean. He has fulfilled the law. He is the One who cleanses through His blood, removing every barrier between God and us! This brings us to our third point

The Testimony to His Cleansing [vv.43-45]

The most natural thing in the world would be to give your witness. Tell others what Christ has done for you – how He cleansed you, restored you. But notice Jesus words to this cleansed leper in **verses 43-44a**, ***"And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once, and said to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone..."***

Here Christ charges him not to say anything to anyone. Jesus forbids the cleansed leper from spreading the news of how he was cleansed and why he was cleansed. Why not? Jesus does not give a reason here.

We may gather some hints from the context. Perhaps one reason is because His time had not yet come. Jesus wants to be known as a 'preacher of the good news' calling people to repent and believe in the gospel. He does not want to be known, most of all, as a 'miracle worker.' He does not want people to be drawn to Him for the wrong reasons. It is the word, the message, after all, applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit, which saves. Another possible reason that Jesus forbids him to spread the news is that this may stir the excitement of the crowds and lead to Christ's death prematurely.

But Jesus does want the cleansed leper to testify of Him in two specific ways: show himself to the priest and give an offering. See **verse 44**, ***"but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded."*** This was according to the God's Word in Leviticus 13-14. He had to let the priest see him, examine him and if he pronounced him clean, he had to offer an offering as we read in Leviticus 13:1-3; 14:1-4.

When the priests would hear that it was Jesus who had so completely and suddenly cured this man, they will have the evidence to Jesus power and His love. At the same time, Christ honors the law by commanding the cleansed leper to offer an offering.

This witness would testify to them that a greater, indeed, our perfect high priest, Jesus, has come. The testimony would challenge them to see that the priesthood is now being fulfilled in Christ. This challenge would eventually lead the chief priests to plot His death [Mark 14:55]. Did the cleansed leper actually go and show himself to the priest? We don't know. The text does not say.

We only know one thing: he disobeyed Christ's command: ***"However; he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the matter."*** What was the result? ***"Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places..."*** [verse 45].

Who is on the outside now? Jesus. Jesus is outside in the lonely places. He and the leper have traded places. Jesus must now remain in unpopulated areas and never publicly enter cities. He ends up suffering the fate of a leper. It's hard to imagine a more vivid picture of Jesus suffering under the curse so that those who deserved the curse experience a blessing. This is the good news in a nutshell!

Mark depicts Jesus as the Servant of the Lord who shall bear the iniquities of His people [Isaiah 53:11] and be numbered with the transgressors [Isaiah 53:12].

Jesus ends up 'being outside' so that this undeserved leper may 'be inside'. This is also your story, I trust? Through faith in Him, you are 'in' because He "suffered outside the gate, outside the camp" [Hebrews 13:11-12]. For your sake He became poor so that by His poverty you might become rich! Do we receive Him who traded place with sinners, like us, by dying on the cross that we deserve?

Indeed, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" [Mark 10:45]. Amen.