

Untouchable!

The Ministry Begins, Part 5

Luke 5:12-16

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Summary: Jesus knew all about leprosy. He knew that this incurable disease caused unfathomable suffering, as it ate away at the body of the diseased. But more importantly, He knew the way the religious leaders taught the people about leprosy—that only God Himself could heal a leper. And so when a leper boldly approaches Jesus, asking for help, join Stephen Davey in exploring another way Jesus declared Himself to be God, this time through His healing power.

In parts of the world—like regions in Nepal and India—entire populations of people are considered contaminated from birth. They are called *Dalits*; the term literally means “broken”.

The Dalits were simply unfortunate enough to be born outside of, or beneath the caste system, which includes four primary castes: the Brahmin or priestly caste, the warrior caste, the artisan caste and the servant caste.

The Dalit was lower than them all.

According to Buddhist and Hindu beliefs in reincarnation, these people were born into their station in life because of a former life of corruption or crime or cruelty.

And so now, reincarnated as Dalits, they are paying for their sins.

Because they are considered broken and, essentially, unclean in the eyes of Hindu and Buddhist gods, for centuries they were not allowed the opportunity to learn how to read and write; they couldn't eat or drink in the same room as a caste member.

In fact, they were not allowed to touch anyone in the caste system or be touched. Even their shadow was considered contaminated.

They came to be known by that more familiar and tragic term “untouchable”.

Szczepanski, Kallie. "Who Are the Dalits?" ThoughtCo, Feb. 16, 2021, [thoughtco.com/who-are-the-dalits-195320](https://www.thoughtco.com/who-are-the-dalits-195320).

In India alone today, there are more than 200 million untouchables.

There probably wasn't any person in the ancient world more untouchable than a

leper. The Bible records both Jews and Gentiles afflicted by this dreaded disease.

According to Levitical law, the leper lived outside the camp or village and essentially lost all personal contact with his family, loved ones and nation.

His life could be characterized by the meaning of Dalit—his world was indeed broken; his dreams, his hopes all dashed to pieces; his world shattered and broken into a million pieces.

He would be viewed without pity simply because the prevailing belief was that he was under the judgment of God—there must have been sin somewhere in the past—their decaying bodies were proof enough of their inner corruption.

One author wrote, “Leprosy might begin with the loss of sensation to some part of the body; the nerves would be affected; then the muscles would begin to waste away; the leper would develop ulcers on their hands and feet; their hair and eyebrows would fall out and their vocal cords become ulcerated; when they talked their voices would be raspy and hoarse and their breathing would be strained. Extremities like ears and noses and fingers and toes would become infected and diseased and often simply fall off. The duration could last 20-30 years. It was the kind of death in which a person died by inches. But death was certain. Even in the medieval period—the Middle Ages—if someone became a leper, the priest would bring them to the Cathedral and read a burial service over

them—because for all intents and purposes, they were as good as dead.”

William Barclay, Matthew: Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1975, p. 296)

During the days of Jesus, no one feared any disease like they feared leprosy. A leper’s only friend was another leper.

Family members and people in general who took pity on them would leave food for them at certain places. But whenever anyone approached a leper, the leper was to shout the word, “Unclean.”

One author put it into contemporary terminology to describe the sense of worthlessness and despair you would feel if you had leprosy. Imagine walking down a sidewalk or entering a grocery store having to shout the warning, “Unclean, unclean.”

Imagine being shunned, despised, exiled, feared, alone, and most of all, overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness; we cannot imagine the physical and emotional effects of being an untouchable.



Is there a sin in your life that has made you feel despised, hopeless or unclean? Have you ever felt like you are unworthy of being touched by God?

As one author wrote, “a leper was hated by others and he eventually came to hate himself.”

By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, matters had only grown more superstitious and even more cruel; if a leper stuck his head inside a house—only for a moment—that entire house, including the beams in ceiling, was considered unclean. They had to remain 50 feet away from the nearest person; it was now illegal in the Jewish community to even greet a leper or speak to them.

R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: Volume 1* (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 162

They were truly untouchable, and they were considered incurable.

In fact, during the days of Christ, the rabbis were teaching that the cure of a leper was as difficult as raising a person from the dead.”

Ibid

Get this: The Rabbis were teaching, “leprosy can only be healed by God.”

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 239

This is going to be magnificent, let me show you—**Luke chapter 5.**

Jesus is continuing on with some of His newly called disciples and He’s teaching in some unnamed city when suddenly, rather unexpectedly, Luke describes it in verse 12:

While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.

Luke 5:12a

Now both Matthew’s Gospel and Mark’s Gospel include this same account and they simply say that he was a leper, but Luke, the medical doctor, says “Oh no—he was full of leprosy.”

He uses the same word in chapter 4 where Luke told us that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit.

Ivor Powell, *Luke’s Thrilling Gospel* (Kregel, 1965), p. 123

This leper was inundated, he was saturated, evidently in the final stages, now under the complete control of leprosy.

After perhaps 20 to 30 years of living with this debilitating disease, he probably didn’t have much time left. He was eaten up with it, we would put it.

There’s an unwritten volume about this man’s life—it’s possible that he had now gone 20 to 30 years since he’d held his children, talked to his wife, ate a meal in his home or slept in his bed; he had watched his family only at a distance. We cannot imagine this man’s broken heart and his broken life.

In a word, this man was an untouchable.

And this is now the moment—this is an act of total desperation—**verse 12 again:**

And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

Luke 5:12b

We’re not told here and frankly we have no idea how he got this close to Jesus.

There's no mention of him warning the crowd by calling out, "Unclean!"

But he's evidently made up his mind that it really doesn't matter anymore. This is his last act of a broken life.

Maybe people saw him coming and they scattered or made room, but however he got close to Jesus, everyone would have fully expected Jesus to order him to get lost!

One historian commented that in the first century, rabbis would be known to literally run away at the sight of a leper; one rabbi wouldn't eat an egg purchased on a street a leper had walked on; another rabbi was proud of the fact that he had only recently thrown stones at a leper to keep him away.

Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume One*, p. 296

This leper doesn't really know what Rabbi Jesus will do, but evidently Jesus wasn't going to throw stones and He isn't going to run away.



From the perspective of the crowd, what risks was Jesus taking by not running away or shunning this leper?

This is one of those amazing Bible moments when a terminal man encounters the true Messiah; when the essence of filth meets the essence of

purity; this is hopelessness falling at the feet of Hope.

And did you notice what he says here in **verse 12:**

"Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."

Luke 5:12b

He didn't say, "Lord, if you can."

James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1* (Baker Books, 2001), p. 127

"Lord, I'm not sure You can, but if you can..." No, he's saying here, "Lord, if you will; Lord, it's entirely in the power of Your will, if you will!"

Luke tells us here that he falls on his face—the verb means to bow or lay prostrate in reverence.

Hughes, p. 169

No doubt the disciples have pulled back in horror from this man; the crowd has moved back in disgust and fear.

Again, the language indicates that this untouchable doesn't make this statement once, but over and over again: ***"If you are willing, you can make me clean; if you are willing, you can make me clean; if you are willing, you can make me clean."***

He's not asking to be cured. Leprosy was viewed as a spiritual judgment from God. The rabbi's called it "the stroke of God." He's asking to be cleansed from the inside out. "Lord, you can make me clean!"

You see, what you have coming from this untouchable is an incredible statement of faith. “Lord, if you *want* to, I know you *can!*”

And what a risk, by the way. If Jesus isn’t the Messiah, if Jesus doesn’t heal him, this man can be arrested and taken out and stoned to death for entering a city without warning; for violating the laws of excommunication; for putting other people at the risk of defilement.

If Jesus isn’t the Savior, this man doesn’t have a prayer.

This is the gospel, listen, if Jesus isn’t the Savior, you don’t have a prayer either; none of us stand a chance for cleansing from our terminal case of sin and corruption.

Leprosy will be used by the prophet Isaiah as a picture of sin. We are all terminally infected: we are all incurable, without any option other than the cleansing of the Savior.

The apostle Paul wrote that if Jesus isn’t who He claims to be, we’re all still in our terminal condition of sin and we, he wrote, are ***of all people most miserable (1 Corinthians 15:19).***

Can Jesus pull off here what no one else on the planet can do? Is He the sovereign Lord this man has risked everything to fall down before?

“Lord, if you will, you can cleanse me.”
I love Jesus’ immediate response, in ***verse 13:***

And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.

Luke 5:13

Mark’s Gospel account adds the emotion of Jesus during this encounter:

Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.

Mark 1:41

Don’t move too fast here; Jesus didn’t need to touch him.

Didn’t Jesus know this man was an untouchable? To touch him was to become defiled!

Jesus could have simply *said* the words, “*Be cleansed.*” That would have been enough.

Why touch him? Have you ever thought about the fact that this is perhaps the first time in 20 or 30 years that this man has been lovingly touched by another person?

In fact, the word for touch is more than a quick touch with one finger—this was a hand resting on him.

With compassion and grace, Jesus put His hand on that man’s shoulder and said the most precious words that man had ever heard,

“I will; be clean.”

Luke 5:13b

“I am willing; be cleansed.”

Have you come to Jesus and asked the same of Him?

Have you reached the point where there are no other options, no other choices, no other alternatives? Have you arrived at that desperate point in life where you’ve realized that religion and ceremony and candles and good deeds and doing your best aren’t enough to keep your terminal case of sin from spreading? From judging you, from burying you, and you can’t live with it any longer?

Have you asked Jesus to cleanse you, from the inside out?

Bow in faith, believing He is indeed Lord and Savior and tell Him that you’re a sinner, you’re terminal, you have nothing to offer Him but corruption. You’re broken, but Lord—if You are willing—cleanse me too.

The Bible says, “And whosoever will, may come.” And this untouchable came, and so can you!

Luke writes at the **end of verse 13 that the leprosy immediately left him.**

In other words, Dr. Luke reports the immediate physical effects of leprosy reversed.



Why does it matter that Jesus healed this man’s body? What does that power communicate to the people about who Jesus is?

This indicates that one moment you would have seen a man with his body eaten up, ravaged by this corrosive disease. But immediately, he’s literally restored.

One author writes, “the flesh that had been eaten away; the fingers that had decayed and fallen off; the raw sores that were spreading over his body were instantly restored and made whole.”

R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel (Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 288

We can’t imagine this stunning scene—curved limbs suddenly straightened; missing toes and fingers, more than likely ears and a nose—that typically decayed and literally fell off when someone was in the final stages of this disease—suddenly, recreated.

Jesus did this in the Garden of Gethsemane after Peter cut off the ear of that man who’d come with others to arrest Jesus. Time suddenly stands still as this man holds his bleeding head—now what? Jesus steps forward and touches this man’s wound and immediately, there’s a brand-new ear (Luke 22).

This is God incarnate exercising His power to create something out of nothing.

This is the Messiah.

In fact, that's part of why Jesus makes this demand of the leper—**verse 14:**

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 them.” But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.

Luke 5:14-15

It is convicting that Jesus commands this man to tell **no one** and yet the word spreads; Jesus commands us to spread the word, and we tell *no one*.

Now even though Jesus has cleansed this man and the leprosy is gone, he remains in social limbo, so to speak, until a priest examines him and declares him cured of leprosy.

Garland, p. 240

In other words, Jesus tells him to follow the directions of Leviticus 13 and 14 for the restoration of a leper.

Jesus knew what was going to happen; He knew that some priest was about to be absolutely mystified, shocked; he will want to know how the leper had been cured. “What man? What touch? What Lord?”

The priest would collect the evidence and take it to the Sanhedrin; this is the

meaning of Jesus telling him to take the proof of his cleansing to *them* (v. 14b). In other words, Jesus knows that He is generating an investigation of Himself.

J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Zondervan Academic, 1981), p. 151

The priests and rabbis and religious leaders had been teaching the people that healing leprosy was a sign that the Messiah had arrived.

Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 119

Jesus effectively tells this man: “Go show them the evidence that the Messiah has arrived!”

When John the Baptizer was languishing in prison by the order of Herod, soon to be executed; he sent a message to Jesus, doubting and discouraged and wondering if Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Jesus sent back the message to John that essentially said, “John, haven't you heard? The lepers are being cleansed!” (Matthew 11:5).

The untouchables are being cured. Doubt no more.

With this stunning demonstration of divine power, Jesus now does what every believer should do, He models for us quiet time with our Heavenly Father; **verse 16 tells us what Jesus did next:**

But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

Luke 5:16

He withdrew? He got alone with God the Father.

The crowds were thronging; He was more popular than ever; people clamored to see Him; they wanted to *hear Him*.

Jesus knew that what mattered most was hearing from His Father.

Is it ironic that the word for **desolate places** can be translated “lonely places”? Jesus voluntarily went to lonely places, having just removed the loneliness of this man.

Luke doesn't give us any details, but here's a man reunited with his loved ones, his family and friends. They had no doubt stopped praying for him a long time ago, the synagogue had forgotten him, the rabbis avoided him, and his friends had stopped waiting for him.

But here came Jesus, and here—to the shock of everyone—comes this untouchable. Their paths cross.

Look at this: hopelessness is bowing at the feet of holiness.



Think again about the moment when you, in your hopelessness, cried out to God and he touched you with His hope. Let that memory produce worship in your heart and on your lips.

And whenever a sinner like you and me comes to the realization that we are terminal; we are incurable; we are sinful; we are untouchable.

But we come and bow at the feet of Jesus, and we ask

Him: “I know you can; will you cleanse me?” Every time, and in every case, He responds, “I will.”

And we are immediately and permanently and completely forgiven—in every case; there is no such thing as a hopeless case with Jesus.

In every case, every untouchable sinner is forgiven, forever.

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