

The Gift Of A Leper

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Fresh starts in life are often an exhilarating experience. Matthew relates the story of a leper coming to Christ and being cleansed of his leprosy, thus giving him a chance to change his life for the better. This story is an example of the love and mercy of the One named God-Who-Heals in the Old Testament. It is the same God, Christ our Healer, who cleanses us from all unrighteousness. The gift of this leper witnesses to us even today the power and nature of God.

When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshipped Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." (Matthew 8:1-4)

After relating the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew brings the reader back into the story flow by reiterating how great multitudes followed Jesus. Verse 2 begins, "And behold a leper came. . . ." This statement becomes significant when we consider that no man can come to Christ unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). That the leper came to Christ—amongst a great multitude, no less—was in itself an act of faith in response to what he heard (Romans 10:17). For him to come to Christ as he did, God had to have revealed to him that Christ was the only One who could truly cleanse him and provide him the fresh start he so desired (Matthew 16:15-17). Notice, too, the humility the leper portrays in expressing his understanding of Christ's abilities.

What makes this encounter so interesting is that, under Old Testament law, the leper was completely defiled in his uncleanness. He was to live alone and warn any who would venture near of possible contamination (Leviticus 13:44-46). Albert Barnes, commenting on Leviticus 13:45, notes, "The leper was to carry about with him the usual signs of mourning for the dead. . . . The leper was a living parable in the world of sin of which death was the wages."

In fact, all disease and degeneration are ultimately products of sin and neglect, but none is so gruesomely picturesque of the effect sin has on a person and a community as leprosy. The disease progresses slowly at first, deeply seated in the bones and joints, essentially undetectable until spots appear on the skin. Gradually, these spots grow to cover the entire body. They give the appearance of foul wounds, sore and festering as the body slowly wastes away in a ruinous heap. Parts of the body actually begin falling off, leading eventually to the individual's death.

A leper can live up to fifty years in indescribable misery, as he watches himself die bit by bit, falling to pieces as a hideous spectacle. For the leper of Matthew 8, it was a hopeless predicament; nothing could be done, apart from God's miraculous intervention (Isaiah 1:4-6; Jeremiah 13:23).

Cleansing Is Not Free

Knowing these gruesome details, one can easily imagine the crowd hastily parting as this man worked his way toward Jesus. Yet, He, in contrast, reaches out to touch the leper, signaling His

willingness and power to heal. In Exodus 15:25-26, God reveals Himself as *Yahweh Ropheka*, or "the Eternal-Who-Heals," at the incident at Marah. Nathan Stone writes in his book, *Names of God*, that this name means "to restore, to heal, to cure . . . not only in the physical sense but in the moral and spiritual sense also" (p.72). Dying to sin and living for righteousness are a kind of healing through Jesus Christ.

Ordinarily, uncleanness is transferred among men, but holiness is not (Haggai 2:10-14). This scene of the leper coming to Christ pictures divine reconciliation, since what is holy and what is profane usually do not mix. This is overcome through the work of our Savior. Jesus stretches out His hand and commands the leper to be cleansed, showing God in action as the Eternal-Who-Heals. This is why the leper's uncleanness does not transfer to Jesus—at first.

Later, however, the death penalty for sin *was* transferred to Jesus. A price had to be paid for the leper's cleansing. "Clean" has a sense of purity and holiness, so to be cleansed was to be made pure. Proverbs 20:9 says, "Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin'?" The leper could no more pronounce himself clean than we can pronounce ourselves sinless (I John 1:10). Proverbs 20:30 adds, "Blows that hurt cleanse away evil, as do stripes the inner depths of the heart." Comparing these two verses from Proverbs suggests that a certain chastening is required for cleansing.

Isaiah 53:4-5 adds another piece to the picture:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

These verses place the emphasis of our cleansing from spiritual impurity on Christ: He paid the price to heal us and restore us to fellowship with God.

Thus, when Jesus Christ became sin for us, on Him was transferred all uncleanness. For those who have repented and accepted His sacrifice, there is increasingly more responsibility to continue this cleansing process in cooperation with and submission to Him. Peter summarizes this idea in I Peter 2:24, "[He] Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed."

The Gift

In addition to His command for the leper to be cleansed, Jesus gives the now-healed man specific instructions to tell no one, but to go and show himself to the priest. He is also to "offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." On Matthew 8:4, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* suggests that Jesus' command for the leper to keep silent shows that He "was not presenting Himself as a mere wonder worker." He was following the simple adage, "Actions speak louder than words." What this man was to do would be seen as testimony, a reminder to us that our obedience to God's commands is perhaps our strongest witness, in which we do not have to say a word.

Before giving the gift that Moses commanded, something else had to occur about a week in advance, beginning outside the camp. First, the leper had to be inspected by the priest, who would confirm that he had been healed. Leviticus 14:4-8 continues the instructions:

[T]hen the priest shall command to take for him who is cleansed two living and clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop. And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water. As for the living bird, he shall take it, the cedar wood and the scarlet and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water. And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed from the leprosy, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose in the open field. He who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean. After that he shall come into the camp, and shall stay outside his tent seven days.

Commenting on these verses, Barnes writes:

The details of a restoration to health and freedom appear to be well expressed in the whole ceremony. Each of the birds represented the leper. . . . The death-like state of the leper during his exclusion from the camp was expressed by killing one of the birds. The living bird was identified with the slain one by being dipped in his blood mixed with the spring water that figured the process of purification, while the cured leper was identified with the rite by having the same water and blood sprinkled over him. The bird then liberated was a sign that the leper left behind him all the symbols of the death disease and of the remedies associated with it, and was free to enjoy health and social freedom with his kind.

Barnes further comments that the cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop were commonly used in purification rites. The resin, or turpentine, of the cedar was a preservative against decay, and it was also used in medicines to treat skin diseases. The color of the twice-dyed scarlet band of wool—with which the living bird, the hyssop, and cedar wood were tied together—reflected the rosy complexion associated with health and energy. Hyssop, too, was thought to have cleansing virtues.

The ceremony of the two birds pictures the change in a healed leper's life: death to the old way that leads to death, and life and freedom to live a new way. Dying to the old self combined with living life anew in Christ is a concept repeated throughout the New Testament. Notice, for example, Romans 6: 4-13:

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should walk in newness of life. For if we had been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

After the ceremony with the two birds, the leper was to wash himself and his clothes, and shave off all his hair, but he was not yet completely clean. However, he was allowed back into the camp, though he had to remain outside his tent seven days. On the seventh day, the man was to wash and shave a second time before going to the Tabernacle or Temple on the eighth day (Leviticus 14:8-9). This continuing procedure is comparable to Paul's instruction in II Corinthians 7:1, that we "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

An Ear, a Thumb, a Big Toe

Finally, on the eighth day, the former leper and the priest offered the regime of offerings ordained in Leviticus 14:10-32. These offerings consisted of a wave offering and a trespass offering with a log of oil, a sin offering, and a burnt offering with its grain offering. An unusual thing was done with the blood of the trespass offering and the log of oil. Leviticus 14:14-17 records that blood from the trespass offering and then oil were to be placed on the tips of the right ear, right thumb, and right big toe. Interestingly, a similar procedure was done only when priests were consecrated (Leviticus 8).

These body parts represent areas of a person's life, and they are all meant to work together so that he may function effectively. The blood and oil, then, cleanse and anoint his hearing (the ear), his works (the thumb), and his walk or way of life (the big toe). His hearing affects his ability to work, and his works affect the way that he lives. Without hearing, a person cannot discern truth, and the ear is also the organ of balance. The hands, symbolic of works, are almost useless without a thumb (for a possible connection to Christ, see John 15:5). Without a big toe, a person walks clumsily and haltingly; it is hard for him to remain upright. To the leper, restored to wholeness, were returned the tools to hear and apply knowledge that could lead to an abundant life.

What a person hears affects what he does, what a person does affects how he lives, and how a person lives greatly affects both his health and his relationship with God and fellow man. The blood, used in cleansing almost all things (Hebrews 9:22), ultimately represents the blood of Christ shed for our sins. The oil symbolizes God's Holy Spirit, so when we are cleansed from all unrighteousness through the blood of Christ, we are able to live a new life in Christ by His Spirit.

After the ritual of the blood and oil, and the offering of a sin offering, burnt and grain offerings were given, signifying the former leper's restoration to God and his fellow man. As a leper, the man had been cut off from society and thus unable to serve God or his neighbor, and incapable of walking in godly love. In the type, then, leprosy, the effect of sin, prevented a true keeping of God's commandments.

The effects of sin, as leprosy, progress slowly. They are undetectable at first but deeply rooted, leading to spiritual dismemberment, a diseased mind, and death. The only possible redemption from both leprosy and sin, and their consequence, is through Jesus Christ, the Eternal-Who-Heals. He cleanses us through the washing of water by the word (Ephesians 5:26), since He paid the price for our healing. We cannot heal ourselves, nor change our nature without His intervention (Jeremiah 13:23).

After God acts to restore us to Himself, we bear an increasing responsibility to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness in cooperation with Him. Doing our part in cleansing ourselves—overcoming—helps prepare us for complete reconciliation and fellowship with the Father, but it is through Christ's shed blood that we have access to Him. We are exhorted in Hebrews 10:19-22:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness [confidence] to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The Bible records no examples of the gift that Moses commanded ever being offered before Matthew 8. Yet, imagine the exhilaration the former leper must have felt as he began his fresh start. Jesus Christ provides us an example of God as Healer, as He took on our infirmities and cleansed us from all unrighteousness. The gift, which Moses commanded by order of the One who later became Jesus Christ, is really to us, that we might believe, have hope, and draw near to Him. The testimony, the witness, is to us.