**SM013 – The Leper and the Paralyzed Man**

A man dressed in ragged garments and hair hanging down to his shoulders, stringy and dirty, sat by the village gates. At a glance, people would see he was someone to avoid. If by chance, someone had not noticed him and approached too closely, he would cry out, "Unclean, unclean." His strange words and dress were not because he wanted to live this way. The law of the land required it. He was a man suffering from skin diseases, sometimes called leprosy, but always someone to avoid.

How long had he been this way? We do not know. But whether it was one month or ten years, the man's heart reflected the condition of his body. He could not associate with others. He could not feel the warmth of a hug, the handshake of an associate, or the playful slap on the back by a good friend. He was not only a physical leper. He, like all others with such a condition, was also a social leper. He was an outcast from society.

He was not allowed to live in the city. Although he could take a spot, with other beggars at the city gates, the law required him to leave the gates at sundown and go … somewhere for his night's rest, anywhere, as long as it was outside the city and away from others. He always slept alone or perhaps surrounded by others with the same condition. When morning came, he could reappear at the gates for another day of begging but while normal people went in and out of the city and could sleep in comfort within the safety of the city walls, he was always on the outside.

Always on the outside! What is it like always to be on the outside? What is it like never to be able to wear a nice piece of clothing? What is it like never to be able to groom one's hair? What is it like not to be able to say to someone passing by "good morning?" What is it like always to have to warn others that they have to stay away from you? What is it like to see others go to their homes in the evening to a nice meal with friends and family while you were always turned away?

And what is it like to know that if you do touch someone else, you have just defiled them? In ancient Israel, if someone touched an unclean person that person was considered defiled and he or she would have to stay outside the city until evening. One wonders how many times the leper had accidently touched someone and then watched as that person withdrew in horror and revulsion and then in anger cursed the leper for his thoughtlessness. What an inconvenience to be touched by a leper! Why don't they just go away and stay far from everyone and everything?

Such a life could do nothing but damage a soul so that the inside of a man looked as bad as the outside.

On this day, the leper had trudged to the city gates to beg for a few scraps of food to sustain him for another day of … what? What was it all for? Why had God allowed this to happen? Perhaps God had done more than to allow this. Perhaps God has caused it to happen. Perhaps God had cursed him to such a miserable existence, but why? Why him? What had he done to deserve this?

And then, one day, Jesus walked by.

Jesus was surrounded by his followers and many others. He passed by the leper, entered through the gates and into the city. The leper, not knowing who Jesus was or what he was capable of doing

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watched the crowd as they continued to surround this man. What was special about him? Why did he attract a crowd? Why was everyone smiling and happy?

The leper craned his head as far as he could to follow the entourage as it made its way into the city. He noticed that the crowd stopped. The crowd parted to allow someone through to get to this man. He was carried on a mat and seemed to be very sick. Why was he allowed in? Wasn't sickness just as much a problem as his skin disease? It didn't seem fair that a person with a sickness, lying on undoubtedly filthy bedding, should be given preferential treatment and be allowed to come into the city and to associate with people.

The leper was engrossed in his sour thoughts and turned his face away from the crowd when he heard a shout and a commotion. Someone with great authority had spoken a word of command. There was a moment of silence. Then louds gasps and shouts of praise to God. "Glory to the God of Israel! He has been healed! He has been healed!"

What had happened? The leper lifted his face to stare at the commotion just inside the gates and then he saw it, the sick man who had entered the crowd carried on his sick bed now walked among the crowd with hands lifted in praise to God. He was healed!

It couldn't be. But there he was rolling up his bedding, then lifting his face to heaven and telling others what Jesus had done for him. Jesus had healed him.

The leper sat there for a while too stunned to think. Jesus healed that sick man? What if … no, it couldn't happen to him could it? Could Jesus heal him? But Jesus was now out of sight going deeper into the city and it was against the law for a leper to enter the town. But the leper thought, "What have I to lose? I'm not getting any better sitting here. And if I enter the city to find this man what is the worst that can happen? They'll just make me leave again, and I won't be any worse for having broken the rule of entering the town."

The leper continued to weigh the options, and then he did something that would change his life forever. He got up from where he sat and walked into the city. There was no stopping him now. "Unclean, unclean" the man said as he passed by. Others recoiled in horror and disgust as this man approached.

"I'm looking for Jesus," the man said. "Please, help me find Jesus." But people scurried away. Finally one man, to get rid of him said, "Down that road you may find him. But he has sent the crowds away. I think he wants to be alone now, and I doubt if even he can help you." Suddenly someone shouted, "there is a leper in this city. Would someone please get him out of here? You know what the law says, he must leave at once."

But the leper would not be deterred. He kept walking into the city, down the road to which he had been directed while the shouts against him grew louder for him to leave the town.

Then in the distance he saw Jesus. The leper knew his time was limited so he ran with all his might. Others behind him were shouting after him but the leper could not be stopped. This was his only hope. With one final burst of energy he ran to the place where Jesus was with his disciples, fell to

the ground and with great anxiety and tears in his voice said, "Lord, if you are willing, make me clean."

Jesus looked at the men who were chasing the leper. They stopped at a distance to see what, if anything, Jesus would do. What would Jesus do? Thoughts raced through the leper's mind. "Would Jesus make him leave? He had healed a sick man but this disease was different. He was a leper. He was not to be touched, and he had broken the law by entering the city."

But the man's anxiety gave way to release and his tears gave way to peace for as he lay on the ground not knowing what would happen next, he felt the gentle touch of Jesus on his head and he heard and felt words of healing power pass from Jesus' lips to his body and soul.

Jesus lifted him up, looked into his eyes and with deep compassion said, "I am willing. Be cleansed." The surge of holy power continued to course through the man. What was happening?

The man looked at his body. It was clean. It was fresh. It was new. The skin disease that had afflicted him for so long was gone. His skin looked like it had been freshly scrubbed and all signs of decay were gone and replaced with health and life.

The man started to shout, "Thank you! Thank you!" His voice started to get louder when Jesus put his hands on his lips and shook his head saying, "Don't say anything about this to anyone. Don't tell a soul. Instead, go the priest in the town and show him your body. Let him examine you and let him pronounce you clean. Make an offering as the Law of Moses commands. Then go home and be with your family. Your body is well and you are restored to your people!"

The man backed away with tears of joy in his eyes and a heart full of praise and this time, as he walked through the village, instead of saying, "Unclean! Unclean!" he asked, "Where is the village priest?"

"What do you want with the priest, leper? Your place is outside the city."

"Not anymore," the leper said. "I am clean and according to the law of Moses if I show myself to a priest he can declare me clean and I can live in the city now. I can come home."

"What?" the people said. "how can this be?"

"Jesus healed me," the man said. A crowd soon gathered around. The leper told them the story, the crowd grew larger and Jesus' command not to tell anyone went unheeded. News spread fast and as the leper went into the heart of the city to find the village priest to pronounce him clean. Jesus walked outside the city to go into the wilderness to be alone.

**Break**

The house where Jesus was teaching was overflowing. People were hungry to hear a fresh word from God. For hundreds of years no prophet had been in the land, and it seemed that the priests and Pharisees were entangled in an endless web of traditions that made life more complex for many. The word of God should give life and freedom. And in Jesus they found this life. Jesus would teach

the word of God and explain to them how God's kingdom was coming into the world and the crowds would grow to huge numbers. In this house, the little crowd in the room as Jesus began grew as word spread that Jesus was teaching. The room where he was sitting filled up. Jesus moved into the courtyard and sat under a canopy to shield him from the sun but the courtyard filled up, and then every room in the house was filled as word spread throughout the city that Jesus was teaching and every entrance into the house was blocked.

Four friends who had heard Jesus teach previously and who had seen him work wonders heard the news. They wanted to be part of this crowd, but not just for themselves. They wanted to be part of this crowd for their friend, who was paralyzed. The men went to the home of the paralyzed man and told him, "We're going somewhere today!"

"Where are you taking me?" the paralyzed man asked.

"We're taking you to see Jesus. You have been in this condition long enough and you are not getting better. Maybe Jesus can do something about it."

They each picked up a corner of the cot on which the paralyzed man lay, and away they went to find Jesus, but by the time they got to the house all entrances were blocked. Their delay in getting their friend meant that every seat in the house was taken. They tried to get through the door, "Please, our friend is paralyzed. Please let us through."

"Sorry, we can't let you pass. We want to see Jesus also and there is simply no way to get in." They tried another door. "Sorry, we can't let you in. Please, be quiet, we're all trying to hear what he is saying and we want to see what he will do. He might heal someone today."

The four friends placed the mat on the ground outside the home where Jesus taught. It seemed today would not be the day for their friend's needs to be met. Then one of them said, "I have an idea. On the side of the house, look, there are some stairs that lead to the roof. If we take those stairs the four of us can lift him up onto the roof. We can walk over to where Jesus is, make a hole in the roof and let him down."

"Are you guys nuts?" the paralyzed man said. "you are going to carry me onto the roof?" The four friends laughed, "And what are you going to do to stop us?" they said. The paralyzed man was at their mercy. "Well, just be careful. How would you like to be in my condition and have someone strap you in bed and carry you all over town!"

"Oh, stop your whining," they said. And they strapped him on his cot and very carefully walked up the stairs and hoisted him onto the roof. They took a moment to survey the courtyard below and the place under the canopy where Jesus was sitting. The area was packed. No one could move. Jesus was surrounded by people as he taught the word of God.

As they made their way along the edge of the roof, they could feel the eyes of people staring at them and saw some pointing. They felt foolish, but like the leper who entered the city illegally because he had nothing to lose, these men and their paralyzed friend had nothing to lose.

When they got to the area directly above Jesus they went to work. They started removing the packed dirt and the tiles that formed part of the roof. They made a small opening but it wasn't big enough so they kept working. Now the teaching had stopped. They had interrupted Jesus and everyone was staring at them.

Some of the scribes were thinking, "Who is dishonoring this rabbi by creating this commotion?"

The owners were thinking, "Who is going to repair the roof and clean up this mess?"

But Jesus remained silent and allowed the mystery to unfold.

Two men jumped through the opening. Then they heard, "OK, here he comes. Are you ready down there?"

"Yes, we're ready. Send him through."

Then the crowd held their breath as the edges of a cot appeared in the opening. Then some legs tied firmly onto the cot and the full body of a grown man came through on his bed, bellowing in a loud voice, "Be careful! Be careful! You're going to drop me!"

No one could believe it. They were astonished that these men would attempt such a foolish thing, but all their thoughts were silenced as Jesus shouted out with laughter and joy in his voice, "Take courage my son!"

And then they were through and the crowd had made a space for them right in front of Jesus who looked at the paralyzed man and with a smile on his face said, "Friend, what faith you and your friends have shown! Your sins are forgiven!"

Such faith the paralyzed man and his friends had shown. Such courage they revealed! Such initiative they had taken and such creativity in getting to Jesus. This is what Jesus was looking for. He was looking for people who would seek him with all their heart. He wanted a living faith. He wanted a faith that had legs to it and it was shown by a man who could not walk and his friends. When Jesus saw their faith he told the man who was paralyzed, "your sins are forgiven."

But not everyone in the crowd rejoiced.

Some of the religious leaders, scribes and Pharisees, were indignant that Jesus would make such a statement. They started murmuring among themselves. "Jesus can't do this. He cannot pronounce the forgiveness of sins. That is a right reserved for God only on the last day. This is blasphemy!"

But Jesus knew what they were thinking in their hearts and he called them out.

"Why are you thinking such evil in your hearts? Why are you reasoning this way?"

The scribes and Pharisees said nothing, astonished that Jesus knew their thoughts. Jesus looked at them and then he said, "I have a question for you – which is easier, to say to the man, 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'rise and walk?'"

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The Pharisees and scribes did not utter a word. The crowd was silent. Everyone knew the answer. Of course it was easier to say, 'your sins are forgiven,' because who could tell what went on inside a man's heart. But to say, 'rise up and walk,' that would be harder for one would put his reputation on the line and everyone would know immediately if one's word was true or not.

The silence continued, and then Jesus walked over to the paralyzed man, loosed the straps that held him to his bed. He stood up and in a loud, clear voice so that everyone could hear he turned to the Pharisees and said, "This is so that you may know that I, the Son of Man, have authority on earth to forgive sins" – he then turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Rise, take up your bed, and go home."

The paralyzed man began to make a loud noise. His useless arms and legs felt a surge of energy through them. What was happening? The man sat up. He rubbed his arms. He rubbed his legs. He got up onto his knees and then he stood in the presence of all.

> The courtyard and house full of people began to cry out, "It can't be. I don't believe it. Look, he's walking! We've never seen anything like this. Praise be to God!" The people at the entrances who had refused to let the paralyzed man in were straining to hear and see, "What's going on? What's going on?"

The crowd parted and the once-paralyzed man folded up his mat and he and his four friends with joy on their faces walked through the crowd, out the door, and went home.

The Pharisees and scribes were speechless and Jesus said, "You have heard and seen the kingdom today." Then, he dismissed the crowd, and as people walked home a holy fear ran through their hearts and they said, "We have seen a remarkable thing today".

The leper and the paralyzed man – two stories of healing by Jesus of Nazareth. One dealt with a man who had a skin disease. One dealt with a man who was paralyzed. One was never allowed into the city. The other was not allowed into a house. One took initiative on his own as he ran into the city and laid himself at the feet of Jesus for mercy. The other needed help from his friends to get to the feet of Jesus.

But the result was the same – the leper was cleansed of his skin infection. The paralyzed man was healed. The leper was received back into his community. The paralyzed man was able to walk home. The leper was touched by the compassion of Jesus. The paralyzed man had his sins forgiven.

And in both cases, Jesus showed his authority over every sickness and every infirmity and every problem that came his way. The kingdom of God had come to that village that day!

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