



Luke 5:14–16

14 Then Jesus ordered him, ‘Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.’
15 Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their illnesses. 16 But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Reflection

Leprosy, or Hansen's disease as it has become known today, is a long term bacterial infection that visibly effects a patient's nerves, respiratory tract, skin and eyes. It may result in a lack of ability to feel pain, and thus, the loss of parts of the extremities (fingers, toes and worse) due to repeated injuries or infection due to unnoticed wounds. Contrary to popular belief, leprosy today is not highly contagious; and is curable with a treatment known as multi-drug therapy. But neither of these were the case in the ancient world. Scribes counted as many as seventy-two different afflictions that were defined as leprosy – many of which were highly contagious. So it shouldn't surprise us that God's word, ever practical, contains two chapters (Le-

viticus 13 and 14) that read like an ancient manual on dermatology. Here's an excerpt for you, from Leviticus 13,¹

45 'Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" 46 As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.

As we can imagine from these verses of Scripture, the social contagion of leprosy was worse than the affliction itself – suddenly and incurably cut-off from your livelihood, your family, your friends and your worshiping community to wander the

¹ James R Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2015, 159.

tombs on the outskirts of civilisation as the walking dead. The ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, speaks of the banishment of lepers as those ‘in no way differing from a corpse.’²

But Jesus Christ is in the business of bringing the dead back to life. In yesterday’s passage he reached out and touched a man covered in leprosy – yes, that is right, he touched him. And he healed him with his word,

‘Be clean!’

Jesus said,

And immediately the leprosy left him.

² Ibid., 160

In this moment, the leper was brought from death to life; because the word of God can cleanse even the worst impurity in those who reach out to Jesus in repentance and faith. Here's what happens next, in today's passage from Luke 5:14–16,

14 Then Jesus ordered him, 'Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.'

15 Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their illnesses. 16 But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

It's hard to imagine the feelings that are threatening to overwhelm the man at Jesus' feet. We imagine him peeling back bandages in disbelief, tears streaming down his face as the reality of what Jesus has done for him washes over him. People had accounted him accursed by God, clearly suffering the consequences of some secret sin. But through faith in Jesus, sin's curse has been lifted, he's been cleansed. And as his thoughts turn towards his long-lost family, Jesus is already a step ahead of him. Verse 14,

14 Then Jesus ordered him, 'Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.'

Jesus here is referring to Leviticus 14, and so we can picture in our mind's eye the events that shortly follow. Here's an extended quote from Kent Hughes to bring you into the eight days of ceremony and celebration that would have followed the man's healing,

It began when a priest met the would-be celebrant outside the camp and verified that he actually was healed. Then, still outside the camp, two birds were presented along with some cedar wood, scarlet yarn, and hyssop. One of the birds was killed in a clay pot (so that none of the blood was lost). This was done above fresh water (symbolic of cleansing). Next the live bird, along with the wood, yarn, and hyssop, was dipped in the blood,

and blood was sprinkled upon the leper seven times as he was pronounced 'clean'. This initial ceremony concluded with the live bird being released in the open fields to wing its way to freedom (Lev 14:1–7). As a result, the blood-sprinkled person could once again join the community. This foreshadowed the effect of Christ's blood, which reconciles man to God and makes it possible for the sinner to join the household of faith.

After the bird's release the cleansed man washed his clothing, shaved the hair from his body, bathed, and entered the camp, where he, his family, and friends rejoiced for seven days (Lev 14:8–9). On the seventh day his head, eyebrows, and beard were

shaved, and he again bathed, so that, like a newborn, he was ready to enter a new phase of his existence.

On the eighth day the former leper offered three unblemished lambs as a guilt offering, a sin offering, and a burnt offering. The guilt offering was not an atoning sacrifice but a restitution for the offerings and sacrifices he was unable to make while a leper. His restitution and fresh commitment were then dramatically emphasized when the priest took some of the blood and smeared it on the offerer's right ear, thumb, and toe, then coated each smear with a second anointing of oil, thereby symbolizing that the man would listen to God's voice, use his hands for God's glory, and walk

in God's ways. Fittingly, his shaved head was then anointed with the remaining oil (Lev 14:12–18; Ex 30:23–25). Finally, having thus declared the leper to be in the Lord's service, the priest made atonement for him with sin, burnt and grain offerings, the last being a joyous expression of gratitude (Lev 14:19–20).³

That's Kent Hughes taking us through what would have happened to this former leper over the next eight days of solemn yet joyous ceremony and celebration. And we can only share in the joy of the healed man and his family as we imagine the communal celebration on the great eighth day. It was if a resurrection had taken place. Very likely there would have been feasting and

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Preaching the word; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 171–72.

singing long into the night.⁴

And as we consider this elaborate process of reconciliation and redemption we can also sense the richness of these ancient ceremonies as they point forward to Christ. The elaborate ritual of Leviticus 14 (as with the entire ancient sacrificial system) anticipates the once-and-for-all atonement of sins through faith in Christ's blood shed for us on the cross. And this is precisely what Jesus' healing the leper in Luke 5 is all about. It prefigures (just like the entire Old Testament sacrificial system) the cleansing of all sinners, cut-off from God and suffering from sin's terminal effects in our world. The resurrection of this leper prefigures our resurrection from the dead at the healing hand of Jesus.

⁴ Ibid.

Think & Pray

With what time remains this morning see a little of yourself in this leper. Consider sin's effects on your life. Think over sin's entanglements, its numbing effect, the way it suppresses the truth resulting in untold damage that so often we fail to see or acknowledge – just like leprosy. Reflect over the distance that sin causes between us and God. But then consider that as a Christian you have been cleansed by Jesus, by the words he has spoken to you in the Bible when he reached into your sin and touched your heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Christians we live within those eight days of solemn ceremony and joyous celebration, telling our story over and over again, loving and embrac-

ing those within our Christian community, and praising God with the whole of our lives. How can you be like this leper today? How can you leave behind any lingering signs of your leprosy, your sin, forever, and be who you now are in Christ?

Thank God this morning that we have been forever cleansed and healed by Jesus. And pray that we might lead others to experience the same in his name.