

**Message: A LEPER: Lord, If You will...**

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**Luke 5:12-15**

**Loving Jesus Sermon Series**

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**Luke 5, 4-25-21**

**<sup>12</sup> While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” <sup>13</sup> And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him. <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.**

Not too long after we moved to Tulsa, I began noticing some spots on my face. It wasn't too concerning nor was it too surprising given that I spent A LOT of time out in the sun as a kid. I did what all of us do when we need a recommendation for something and I made a post on Facebook saying “hey, can someone recommend a good dermatologist in Tulsa.” Not surprisingly we have a few in our church and I found out that Kristen Rice, a member of our church, was a dermatologist and she was about my age so she seemed like a good person to go see.

It was a pretty easy visit. It was exactly what I thought they were, pre-cancerous spots which are pretty common for a fair skinned guy who had too many sunburns as a kid. Kristen said I can freeze them, BUT what I recommend is a topical cream because I think it will be a better and more thorough treatment for you in the long run.

I thought topical cream, twice a day. Piece of cake. And then Kristen said I do need to warn you that this cream can make your skin bright red and it

could be painful for a week or two. I thought ahh no big deal, until she said “I really recommend you don’t start the treatment until you have 2 straight weeks that you’re not going to be up on the stage in front of people.” And I began to think, ok, I guess this stuff is pretty serious. And then she said oh and by the way you almost certainly have other cancerous spots on your face that just aren’t visible yet, so I recommend you rub the cream all over your face, not just on the spots.

Let me tell you that Dr. Rice is a great doctor because that cream did exactly what she said it was going to do! I’m not super self-conscious, but I have never been more self-conscious in my life! I started that cream on a Sunday night knowing that I wasn’t preaching or assisting the next 2 Sundays just like Kristen said and let me tell you that was wonderful advice! Within a few days my face was BRIGHT red like the Koolaid man (**SLIDE**). After a few more days it was not only bright red, but it was literally burning my skin to the point I had open sores on my face. It was extremely painful and I looked absolutely hideous.

And what was most awkward is that people didn’t know what to say to me. People weren’t sure what to say because it’s kind of rude and awkward to say “dang, what happened to your face?” Some people probably thought I had fallen asleep in a tanning bed and so they were just embarrassed for me. Some people kept their distance from me because they thought I had some kind of communicable disease.

Now why do I tell you this story? First of all, if you have spots on your face, you need to get them taken care of! And while the cream is scary, you might end up with a beautiful face like I have now.

But in all seriousness, I tell you this story, because here’s how our text starts, Luke 5:12 (**SLIDE**): **While Jesus was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, ‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.’**

Probably very few of us have ever had any experience with leprosy and so this morning as we talk about a leper, it’s hard for us to even imagine what that could be like. The closest thing I have personally experienced was my 2

weeks on the dreaded face cream. Painful, embarrassing, people trying to avoid you, people feeling sorry for you, open sores. Except with leprosy take all of that and imagine it covering your entire body and it made you a complete outcast to society because of it. And it generally lasted a lifetime instead of just 2 weeks.

In those days diagnosing leprosy wasn't an exact science like it would be today. In this time almost any kind of skin disease scared people to death and you were exiled. Probably not all that different than any time over the past year when you coughed or you sneezed or you blew your nose and everyone around you immediately assumed that you had Covid and wanted nothing to do with you!

So if you had any kind of skin blemish you were exiled with others and if you became healthy you could go to the temple and get a clean bill of health and be restored. But for most it was indeed leprosy and if you had leprosy you basically hung between heaven and earth. Here's what I mean: If you were a leper you were unable to die because it didn't immediately kill you, it was a very slow and painful death. So you were unable to die, BUT you were unable to participate in life.

They had to watch the world go on around them from a distance. They watched their children grow up from afar. They watched their husband or their wife become their X husband or wife. They watched people prosper, they watched the world change, but they couldn't participate. They hung between heaven and earth. Nobody would come near them, let alone touch them.

Now check out **(SLIDE) V.13: "Jesus stretched out his hand and TOUCHED him."**

What must it be like to be someone who has lived in isolation for years, who has never been allowed human contact to have someone reach out and touch you? I've shared this story with you before a few years ago, but it's so powerful and fits so perfectly with our text, that I have to share it again.

This is Vinicio Riva. **(SLIDE)** He's had a very difficult life. At age 15 he was diagnosed with Neurofibrosis, which is a disease that spreads painful boils across the body. You can imagine the looks this man gets. His father refuses to touch him. Strangers on the street yell at him and tell him to get away from them. Over and over he has received the message that you are unwanted. As painful as his condition is, the psychological damage is far worse.

A few years ago the Pope was going to be near his hometown and so he and his aunt decided to go and try to catch a glimpse. He was hopeful that perhaps his aunt would get a handshake and he might get a smile. Instead what he got was a 60 second full embrace from the Pope. **(SLIDE)** Then the Pope put his hands on his head and he kissed him. When they interviewed Vinicio later he said: I felt like I was in paradise. His aunt said in an interview later: he has never been the same since. The way he sees himself and the way he interacts with the world has changed.

So Jesus touches the leper and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of v.13 Jesus says **"I am willing, BE CLEAN."** Jesus could have just said be clean, but he uses the word Thelo which in greek means "I desire." So it's not just that Jesus can heal the man, but he deeply desires to. And the end of v.13 tells us the leprosy immediately left the man. And then v.14 **(SLIDE)** tells us **Jesus charged him to tell no one.** But instead GO. Jesus says I want you to go and I want you to show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing as Moses has commanded.

Why does Jesus do this? Because according to OT law, if someone had leprosy and they wanted to be re-introduced to society they had to make the long trip to Jerusalem to the temple to find a priest. The priest would check them out and either declare them cleansed or would send them back into isolation. Not all that different than what many of us have had to go through this past year with Covid when the doctor or the health department or maybe your HR director told you that you had to go to quarantine.

We lovingly refer to our HR Director, Shari Graham, as the Covid Czar **(SLIDE)**. If you don't know Shari, can I just say she is an incredible asset to

our church and to our staff. But as the Covid Czar, she had final say on when a staff member could return to work if they had tested positive for Covid or had been exposed to someone with Covid. Shari is kind of like that temple priest who had the final say on whether a leper could return to society or not. You go to Shari or the temple priest to find out if you're allowed out of quarantine and back into society or whether or not you have to serve more time.

Now at this point, after the man is healed, word has begun to spread all over the land and people were coming from everywhere to see Jesus. We're going to see this played out in next week's sermon. Pastor Tom will be preaching on the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of this chapter and we're going to read about men having to cut a hole in a roof to get to Jesus because the crowds were so large. This is why Jesus tells the leper not to tell anyone because Jesus knows it will cause too big of a commotion wherever he goes. And our story affirms this for us because it closes in v.15 by telling us **(SLIDE) "But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.**

Ok, so let's just quickly recap: We've got a man with leprosy. We know that because of the cultural and religious laws that man's life was essentially ruined and he was forced to live in isolation. He begs Jesus to heal him and Jesus doesn't just heal him, but he breaks every cultural norm and he touches him in the process of healing him. Jesus tells the man NOT to tell anyone because he doesn't want the crowds to grow even bigger, BUT the man, like most of us would do, tells everyone and so the crowds only get bigger.

It's a great story, but I think it leaves the average reader, the every day Christian with one big question. And that's this: How come Jesus healed the leper, but he didn't heal my mom, or my dad, or my brother, or my grandpa, or my spouse, or my friend. That I prayed and prayed for. I had my Bible study group praying, I had my Sunday school class praying, I prayed fervently, but God didn't heal my loved one. How come Jesus healed the leper, but he didn't heal my marriage. How come Jesus healed the leper, but he hasn't yet healed me of my addiction, of my anxiety, of my mental health struggles?

I wish I could give you the clear answer that you would like to that question, but I can't. I can't tell you why God heals some and he doesn't heal others. But I think the leper's request to Jesus sheds some light for us. I want to go back to what the leper says to Jesus in v.12 because it's beautiful. I mean it really sums up what it means for us to have faith. Listen to what he says: **(SLIDE) Lord, if you will, you CAN make me clean.** Notice he doesn't say Lord I believe you will I believe you will I believe you will. My friends are back home praying, my Sunday school class is praying, my pastor is praying, we believe you will we believe you will we believe you will.

Instead, check out the amazing faith that this leper has. He says: I have perfect faith that if you are willing, you CAN make me clean. And why would this leper be absolutely certain that Jesus COULD heal him? Not that he would heal him, but that he had the ability and COULD heal him. The answer is because he knew Jesus had healed other people. He went to Jesus because of evidence and because of what he had seen and heard. He was absolutely confident that Jesus could do for him what he needed done. And that's all the faith Jesus is looking for. Not faith that he will, but faith that he CAN.

In Jewish and Christian tradition THAT is faith. Not faith that God will, but faith that God can. But here's the problem. So many of us weren't taught this. Instead we were taught that faith was some kind of force or power. It's a way that we manipulate God to do something.

People will resist this simple definition of faith that says "I know God can and I leave it up to God if he will." And the reason many people resist this definition of faith, the reason so many people have walked away from church all together is because it leaves God in control! It's normal to be upset when our prayers and our wishes don't come to fruition. So I don't want you to feel beat up. But that's not faith. That is us trying to manipulate God. I'm so glad God didn't answer my 16-year-old prayer of giving me a corvette and a million dollars. That would have been the end of me. And aren't you glad God hasn't answered some of your prayers?

The problem is that when things don't work out the way we were told they would if we just prayed hard enough and had enough faith and were good little boys and girls. The problem is that when that happens, we lose faith. But we lose a faith that was founded on and based on something it was never supposed to be based on to begin with.

I'm sure all of you can think of a time in your life when you prayed for something really significant either for yourself or a loved one and that prayer didn't come to fruition. I remember the first time for me that I really prayed earnestly and felt like God had let me down. I was 16 years old and I had just found out my best friend's dad had a heart attack and was on his way to the hospital.

I can remember fervently praying that God would heal my friend's dad. I remember begging God to spare his life and to heal his heart and to allow him to come back from this and live a normal life. That prayer did not come to fruition. And I remember the devastation and confusion I felt.

At that particular time in my life, I was in a weekly Bible study and accountability group with 3 very close friends, one of whom was my friend who's Dad had just died. We met every week for Bible study, we tried to actively evangelize in our school. We did local missions together. Most people would probably say we were good young Christian men. And so because of that I had this idea that God should have answered my prayer and saved Chad's dad. But he didn't and I was devastated and felt betrayed. And we know this kind of thing happens all the time to well-meaning Christians of all ages.

Now here's why this is a really big deal. Here's why this should be a really big deal to parents and to grandparents and to every church out there. An entire generation is abandoning faith because the church has signed God's name to promises that God never made. So no wonder your faith fell apart. No wonder you couldn't maintain confidence in God. People taught you to hold God accountable to things God never promised to do.

Now thankfully I had an amazing mentor and small group leader who just happened to be the mom of my best friend whose father had passed away.

Her name was Lajuana and this grieving widow poured into me and our little Bible study group and really helped me understand that faith has nothing to do with God always answering our prayers.

\*I want to take a quick aside here to tell you that we need more people like Lajuana Sexton. Lajuana was a middle-aged mom of 3 kids who loved Jesus and wanted her son and his friends to love Jesus. And so she gave of her time to invest in us. We have a lot of children and youth in this church that need someone like that. We need you to step up like Lajuana did and be a small group leader in student ministry or a volunteer in children's ministry. You may think you have nothing to offer, but I assure you that if you love Jesus and you want to help others follow Jesus, you can make a huge difference in the life of a young person. I hope you will reach out to Kathy Owens if you'd be willing to volunteer in kids ministry or to Shelby Hood if you'd be willing to volunteer in student ministry (**SLIDE**). Ok commercial over, back to the sermon:

If you grew up like I did thinking God was like a vending machine... You know, get the combination just right. Live a good life, don't sin too much, attend church, and then vending machine God will drop down blessing on us and he will answer our prayers. You're going to find yourself disappointed by God. Or maybe you grew up with bad things don't happen to good people God. Meaning that only bad sinful people have bad things happen to them, if you live a good life then God is going to do good things for you. If that was you, of course you lost faith at some point if this is how you were raised. Of course our young people are going to walk away from church if this is what they have been taught. And sadly it's what so many of our churches have taught for years and years.

God never promised any of these things. But here's the fabulous news for us this morning: God did not demonstrate his love for you and God did not demonstrate his concern for you by promising that nothing bad would happen. God did not demonstrate his care for you by promising that every illness would be healed. And he did not demonstrate his love for you by promising a flawless perfect marriage. God didn't demonstrate his care for you by promising that you would never lose your job and that you would always have enough money. God didn't demonstrate his love for you by

promising that your kids and your grandkids would be perfectly healthy physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

God's promise to you is more wonderful than any of those things. The apostle Paul said it this way, it's perfect: God demonstrates. That is God put on a demonstration. God put on a demonstration to demonstrate his love for you. And it had nothing to do with making sure that everything worked out for you. It had nothing to do with making sure you got that promotion at work, or you locked down that spouse you were hoping for, or you were able to buy that house you wanted.

God did something way bigger than that. Romans 5:8 (*SLIDE*) says **God demonstrates his love for us in this that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** The reason this was present tense for the apostle Paul is that he was still alive when Jesus died. So this is very personal to him. He's saying while I was still a sinner. While I was still reeking all kinds of havoc on the church, Christ died for me. Or the way he'd say it to us is that while you were still sinning. Perhaps before you even knew there was a God who loved you. God went ahead of you and he sent his son to die for us while we were still sinners.

The trustworthiness, the wonderfulness, the goodness of God, was settled at the cross. NOT at an answered prayer. He came to this side of heaven to be with us so that the one thing we'd never have to wonder or worry about is his love FOR US.

So friends this morning I believe our application is simple: We need to have a faith that starts and ends with believing that Jesus' death on the cross is all we truly need and it's all God needs to do to demonstrate his love for us. Perhaps you would say that your faith has been kind of stagnant lately. Maybe you would say that you're on the brink of walking away from your faith. Maybe you would say you don't have faith.

I want you to know that you're welcome here, because none of us have it all together. We are getting more and more divided as a culture and the media and many others want to try and convince people that a church like Asbury doesn't love everyone and doesn't welcome everyone. And I just

want to stand up here today and tell you that is a bunch of junk. I want you to know that regardless of where you are in your faith, regardless of what questions you may have, regardless of what sin you have in your life and we all have it, you are welcome here. So your application is pretty similar to what Pastor Tom said last week: COME! Don't live life in isolation like a leper, come and join us. But don't just come, come and get involved. Get yourself into an ADC or a small group. If you don't know how to get involved, call or email the church this week and let us help you. You need the church and we need you.

But can I also encourage you to just sit and meditate on the cross. Sit and think about the God of the universe loving you so much that he would send his one and only son to die for your sins so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Let that truth sink in and mesmerize your heart and see if that doesn't rekindle your faith and your affections for God.