

A Cure for the Incurable

Resurrection Power, Part 1

Mark 1:40-41

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

The most destructive thing in the world is sin. Sin corrupts and it corrodes completely. People are all born in sin and sin always leads to death. During the earthly ministry of Jesus 2000 years ago, Jesus showed his power and authority over every kind of malady he came across. Jesus dealt with sinners and came to save them. He overcame even the most difficult cases and thereby demonstrated his power and sufficiency over everything else.

Discussion Points:

Leprosy is one of the most feared diseases of all time. People did everything they could to avoid any chance of exposure and the people who suffered from the disease were abandoned and hated by all. Jesus did not fit into the normal mold of how someone would view a leprous person.

- How did Jesus treat lepers?
- How did that differ from how others dealt with lepers?
- Why do you think Jesus did not react to leprosy with fear?
- What emotions does Mark 1 show Jesus exhibiting?

Sometimes when we read about the miracles that Jesus performed we can lose sight of Jesus' true and real humanity.

- Why is it important to remember that Jesus was fully human as well as fully God?
- How would different understandings of Jesus' nature lead to different interpretations of this passage?
- How does the reality of Jesus' humanity encourage us in our actions?

Leprosy is a disease that affected a person's entire body and had no cure.

- How is leprosy similar to sin?
- How does sin eat away at a person?
- Can sin be contained in one part of your life without it polluting the other aspects?

Discussion Guide cont.

One of the most dangerous aspects of sin is that it is easy to not have a proper view of its seriousness.

- How does God view sin?
- Why do we have such a difficult time viewing our sin the way God does?

Jesus showed that he can heal every physical problem just like he can heal any spiritual problem. He has the power and authority to clean and heal anything. The difficulty is that we have trouble asking him for his healing in our lives.

- What makes it so difficult for us to ask for Jesus to cleanse us?
- In what ways do we tend to minimize our problem of sin?
- In what ways do we bury ourselves in hopelessness because of our sin and think we are too far gone to receive forgiveness?
- What helps us to see ourselves rightly and understand our need for Jesus?

Gospel Connection:

This leper knew he was in trouble. He could clearly see and feel himself falling apart because of the disease that had taken over his body. In a similar way, we all have been infected with a serious disease that we call “sin”. And while sin also invades and pollutes fully and is never satiated, it has the added danger of typically being unseen. Often we try to hide it or deny its presence in our lives, but it is always present. There is no cure that we can use to get rid of this sin and it continues to grow and only has one possible outcome: death. But thanks be to God for sending his perfect son Jesus to provide a way for us to be cleansed. When Jesus came to earth and died on the cross, he took the punishment for all sin and broke its enslaving power over our lives. He has paved the way for us to be redeemed and restored and healed. To experience this healing, all we need to do is to put our faith and trust in Jesus and humble ourselves to confess our sin and confess our need to be saved. We need to see ourselves rightly in order to see Jesus rightly. And when we accept that, He will save us.

Practical Implications:

- Think:** Is there sin in your life that you are excusing or justifying to yourself? Have you confessed your need of being forgiven and healed?
- Pray:** Ask God to search your heart and expose to you the places where you have let sin inhabit. Ask Him to help you to defeat sin and purge it from your life. Thank Him for Jesus who gives us the power to break away from the enslavement of sin so that we can follow Him.
- Do:** Find people around you that you can confide in. Develop friendships of accountability and encouragement to help you overcome the sin that so easily entangles us.

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Resurrection Power, Part 1

Mark 1:40-41

A few years ago I was flying back from a conference on the West Coast – the last leg between Charlotte and Raleigh – and I had my Bible out on my tray reading. Just so you know, although that sounds really spiritual, I was behind on my Bible reading schedule and I was cramming to catch up.

A young woman sat next to me and her husband mentioned to me that she was religious as well. She told me she had been raised in the Episcopal Church and her husband had been raised in the Catholic Church. So they had both Protestant and Catholic roots – they had their bases covered.

I had a chance to do something I absolutely love to do – to show her that her church and my church and church in general cannot save anybody.

I told her, “Listen, the church wants to throw a little water on your problem; maybe an extra church service or some ceremony and a few candles and the promise to keep your nose clean. But our problem is much deeper than a ceremonial solution – we’re broken and sinful.”

I turned and began to show her several verses in Romans chapter 1 about the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of mankind who will stand before God without any excuse; then on to Romans chapter 2 about our conscience informing us that we’re sinful.

She would often exclaim, “I’ve never seen that before; my church never told me any of this stuff before.”

Then the plane touched down – I wasn’t anywhere near finished – I’d only made it to Romans chapter 3. I told her how to contact me if she was serious about the gospel and wanted to know more. I hope she will.

I could tell that she was struck with the realization that religion in general merely creates a system of works so that you can check

off the boxes and hopefully do a good enough job to get into heaven by your own efforts.

That would be like Humpty Dumpty getting out a big bottle of super glue and saying, “I think I can fix my broken life.”

No, the gospel means you and I are terminally hopeless. That’s why we have to be saved; we’re drowning and we can’t swim to shore – we must be rescued.

There probably wasn’t any condition more desperate in the ancient world than leprosy. For the Israelite, it spelled judgment and discipline. According to Levitical law, the leper lived outside the camp and essentially lost all contact with his family, loved ones and nation.

For centuries, this particular disease baffled the medical community. It had an unknown origin, a painfully destructive process and it brought on a slow death.

E.G. Masterman wrote, “No other disease reduced a human being for so many years to so hideous a wreck.”

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; sometimes the tendons contracted until the hands bent inward like claws; every leper would experience the ulcerations on their hands and feet. The ulcers would develop a foul discharge; the eyebrows would fall out and the vocal chords became ulcerated with the voice becoming hoarse and the breathing 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 a man became a leper, the priest brought the man to church and read his burial

service over him – because for all intents and purposes, he was a dead man.”ⁱ

During the days of Jesus, people feared no other disease like they feared leprosy. No one came closer to a leper than 2 feet – if that; even food purchased on a street traveled by a leper would be thrown away.

By the time Jesus began his ministry, rabbis would throw stones at lepers to keep them at a distance; one historian remarked that rabbis were known to take to their heels at the sight of an approaching leper.ⁱⁱ

People who took pity on them would leave food for them at select places. But whenever anyone approached lepers, the leper was to shout out the word, “Unclean! Unclean!”

Leprosy became, perhaps more than any other disease over the centuries, the perfect illustration of the corruption and the corrupting nature of sin; the inability for man to heal himself and desperate need for the healing power of salvation.

There is no surprise then, that when Jesus Christ came to seek and to save sinners, He demonstrated the power to heal – and not just anybody – but the shocking sovereign display of power to cure the incurable leper.

In fact, when John the Baptist was in prison, besieged by doubts about the Lord, he sent a message to Jesus – “Are you the expected one [after all] or are we to look for another Messiah?” And Jesus sent him an answer back with the disciples that basically said, “Let me remind you that lepers are being cleansed.” (*Matthew 11:5*)

His power to cleanse away what had become the terminal illustration of terminal sin marked Him as the true Messiah.

As we prepare for remembering the Lord’s death and our own rescue from sin and judgment, let me briefly show you one incident recorded for us in the Gospel by Mark and chapter 1; this is the first recorded Jew being cleansed of leprosy.

And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him . . . Mark 1:40a

The Gospel of Luke included this same event, but Luke, more than likely because he was a doctor, added a medical footnote to his account that this leper was covered – literally, he was filled – with leprosy. (*Luke 5:12*)

This is the same word used by Luke a chapter earlier to describe that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit when he went into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

This leper was full of leprosy; he was under the full and devastating effects of this disease. After 20 to 30 years of living with this debilitating disease He probably didn’t have much time left. So sick was he; so eaten up with this dreaded disease!

There’s an unwritten volume about this man’s life – but it’s not hard to imagine. It had been 20-30 years since he’d held his children, or slept in his bed at home; he had watched his family only at a distance – and how it must have broken his heart.

Sin, like leprosy, always robs us – always destroys us – always takes us in our corruption toward hopelessness and loneliness and isolation and despair.

This is a moment – this is an act of desperation for him here.

And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him.

We’re not told, but I don’t have any idea how he got this close to Jesus. Maybe people saw him coming and they scattered or made plenty of room; evidently Jesus wasn’t like the other rabbis because he wasn’t throwing stones to keep him away; and Jesus isn’t running . . . afraid of being defiled by sinners.

Jesus isn’t afraid of sinners, Luke writes, He came to seek and to save sinners (*Luke 19:10*). This is one of those signature moments when a terminal sinner encounters the true Savior.

Mark goes on in this text that the leper falls to his knees and begs the Lord – with these words – ***“If You are willing, You can make me clean.” Mark 1:40b***

The tense of this verb informs us that he repeated this request over and over again – there he kneels – terminal, hopeless, diseased,

incurable; this is his only hope. “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.”

Did you notice, he doesn’t say, “If you’re willing you can heal me” or “you can take away my leprosy”? No – ***if you are willing, You can make me clean.***

He’s asking for complete, ceremonial, spiritual restoration; he’s going to the deeper issue of all that he wants and longs for – You can make me clean!

The word Luke uses in his account for this man’s kneeling prostration before the Lord was the phrase most commonly used when people knelt and worshipped their gods.

He’s kneeling here, effectively worshipping the anointed Messiah. And what you have here coming from his lips is an incredible statement of faith.

And what a risk, by the way. If Jesus isn’t the Messiah, this man will be stoned to death for entering a walled city; for violating the laws of excommunication; for putting other people at risk of defilement. If Jesus isn’t the Savior, this man doesn’t have a prayer; he doesn’t stand a chance for cleansing.

Listen, if Jesus isn’t the Savior – you and I don’t have a prayer either; we don’t stand a chance for cleansing. Terminal, incurable; without a Savior, as Paul wrote, we are, without the legitimacy of Jesus, ***of all people most miserable. (1 Corinthians 15:19)***

So can Jesus pull off what no one else on the planet can? Is He the sovereign savior this man has risked everything to worship?

I love Jesus’ immediate response, in ***verse 41. Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him. Mark 1:41a***

Don’t move too fast here; Jesus could have simply said the words, but no – and this is perhaps the first time in 25 years this man has been touched in kindness by another.

The word for touch is more than a finger; this was his hand upon this man’s shoulder. Jesus didn’t have to touch him to heal him. He could have simply spoken the words, “Be healed.”

But with compassion and grace, he put his hand on that man’s shoulder and said the most precious words that man had ever heard, ***Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Mark 1:41b.***

“I am willing; be cleansed.” Have you come to Jesus and asked the same of Him? You’ve had enough of religion and ceremony and candles and prayers and good deeds and trying your best to keep your leprosy of sin from spreading, but you can’t hide it any longer.

Bring it to Jesus. Pray this wonderful sinner’s prayer, prayed by a leper 2,000 years ago: “Lord Jesus – I bow in believing you are who you say you are. I have nothing to offer you but corruption and corrosive, terminal sin. But if you are willing – cleanse me too.”

And whosoever will, may come. He came! Have you?

There are two deceptions that will keep you from coming to the Savior. One is that you are not really a sinner. “I’m not that bad; there’s nothing wrong.” My friend, if you do not realize how badly you need saving, you will never come and kneel and find in Jesus your Savior.

The first deception is that you’re not that much of a sinner. The second deception is that you’re too much of a sinner – you’re too far gone – you’re beyond help. The disease of sin has spread too far.

Take it from a man whose family had probably stopped praying for him a long time ago; the synagogue had forgotten him; the rabbis didn’t want him; his friends and family had stopped holding out hope a long time ago. He and everyone he knew had come to the conclusion that he was beyond help. But here he comes!

Here is hopelessness coming face to face with holiness; here is depraved pollution being touched by divine purity.

And whenever a sinner bows at the feet of Jesus . . . terminal sinners are cleansed by their triumphant Savior. Every time, in every case – guaranteed.

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

ii Ibid