

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰ A leper came to him (and kneeling down) begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." ⁴² The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. ⁴³ Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. ⁴⁴ Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." ⁴⁵ The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.



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The Coming Boundaries

The Markan narrative continues to move along. Our gospel for this Sunday is still early in the first major section of Mark's Gospel which extends from 1:14 to 3:6, and describes the initial phase of the Galilean ministry. A quick summary of events so far include: the calling of the first disciples, Jesus' ministry in and around Capernaum, taught with authority in the synagogue in Capernaum so that the people "were astonished at his teaching", cast out a demon from a possessed person, healing Peter's Mother-in-law, and later that same day healing all the sick that were brought to him. Then we read from last Sunday's gospel:

³⁵ Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. ³⁶ Simon and those who were with him pursued him ³⁷ and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." ³⁸ He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." ³⁹ So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

This week we consider Jesus' cleansing of a leper (1:40-45). Donald Juel, (*Mark*, 43) connects our text with the accounts that follow this episode. Juel outlines the Gospel of Mark from this point to the end of Mark 3:6 under the title "Transgressor of the Boundaries." This is just one of many stories in which Jesus will be accused of violations of ritual boundaries."

Leprosy and the Man

The reading from the Old Testament, paired with our gospel, comes from *Leviticus*:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch which appears to be the sore of leprosy, he shall be brought to Aaron, the priest, or to one of the priests among his descendants. If the man is leprous and unclean, the priest shall declare him unclean by reason of the sore on his head.... "The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!' As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp." (Lv 13:1-2, 44-46)

The identification of the man who came to Jesus as "a leper" is not as precise as at first glance it may seem. Medical researchers who have examined the biblical data in Lev. 13–14 feel certain that the biblical term "leprosy" is a collective noun designating a wide variety of chronic skin diseases, one of which may have been interpreted in the modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, anyone who was identified as a leper was reduced to a most pitiful state of existence.

In addition to the physical ravages of the disease, his cultic impurity was graphically described in the Levitical provision about wearing torn clothes, warning others that he is "unclean" and dwelling outside the camp. Rabbinic refinement of the biblical legislation imposed many practical difficulties upon the leper, for even a chance encounter between the leper and the non-leper could render the latter unclean. Lepers were allowed to live unhampered wherever they chose, except in Jerusalem and cities which had been walled from antiquity. They could even attend the synagogue services if a screen was provided to isolate them from the rest of the congregation. In spite of these two provisions, however, leprosy brought deep physical and mental anguish for both the afflicted individual and the community in which or near which he lived. It is against this background that the significance of the cleansing of a leper by Jesus can be appreciated, whether the man in Mark's account had true leprosy or some other frightful skin disease [William Lane, *Gospel of Mark*, 85-86].

The Encounter

The healing of the leper is a remarkable scene, full of marked contrasts. It is a fitting conclusion to Mark's first chapter. The powerful but misunderstood Messiah is approached directly by a person who is normally denied any contact with healthy people. This outcast's trust in Jesus is met by the pity and power of his touch and word. However, the leper's exhilaration at his cure is dampened by a stern repetition of Jesus' prohibitive messianic secret: "Tell no one anything!" (v. 44). (Only the priest is to know, because only his word can allow the outcast to re-enter the society from which his sickness has kept him.)

The leper, who had either seen Jesus' mighty works or had heard about them, came beseeching Jesus to remove from him the ravages and stigma of this dreadful disease. There are textual variations in what exactly the leper said. The majority of texts are translated as the leper having a firm conviction and then saying, "*If you wish, you can make me clean.*" Some interpreters opt to render the verse, "*...you can pronounce me clean.*" Is there a difference?

Grammatically there is no real support for choosing “pronounce” over “make.” Theologically, there is a world of difference. According to the dictates of *Leviticus*, it was the role of the priest to declare the state of the disease. In other words, the priest was an empirical observer who took no action beyond observation and declaration; the priest was not the source of the healing.

In choosing to properly translate the verb as “*make me clean*,” one is directly attributing the power of God to Jesus

In addition, the man is asking for healing, not for the pronouncement that he is clean ritually, which only a priest could declare. Perhaps the man had shown himself to a priest once or several times already. His appeal was for Jesus to do what was believed impossible by human means, to cure him of his disease. It is impossible to tell whether he regarded Jesus as an itinerant miracle-worker, or perceived more deeply that he was one through whom the power of God was directed.

Jesus’ Reaction

⁴¹ *Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, “I do will it. Be made clean.”* ⁴² *The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.* ⁴³ *Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.* ⁴⁴ *Then he said to him, “See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.”*

The encounter between Jesus and the leper contains several verbs that describe Jesus’ emotional state. How they are translated plays an important role in the tone of the passage. The textual tradition indicates that uncertainty over the emotional tone of the passage also existed in antiquity. Most manuscripts describe Jesus’ initial reaction to the leper’s appeal (v. 41), rendered “filled with compassion” or “moved with pity” (*splagchnistheis*). This verb is used in other miracle accounts (Mark 6:34; 9:22). The word *splagchnistheis* is derived from the word *splanchna*, meaning “bowels” or “innards.” In a figurative sense, it refers to deep feelings, emotions, or compassion. Which specific emotion needs to be inferred from the surrounding text. There is a minority of texts that have a different verb, *orgistheis*. These texts translate Jesus’ reaction as “moved with indignation (or anger).”

While wondering what to make of the translation in v.41, one needs to consider the language of v.43: “*Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.*” The word “dismissed” (*exebalen*) is the same word used in casting out demons in Mark 1:12. There it is translated as “driven out” or “expelled.” In the same sense, *embrimaomal*, “sternly warned” does not capture the normal sense of anger or displeasure associated with the word and its usage.

In other words, there is a range of emotions available to the translators. But in any case, the v.41 presents a grammatical challenge as the subject of the phrase is not clear. It is unclear if the emotion is to be assigned to Jesus or the leper.

Arguing for the leper as subject, the thought is that he has become so overwhelmed with his virtually hopeless plight that in anger he reaches out and touches Jesus. But if one assumes that Jesus is the subject, the anger can be understood as an expression of righteous indignation at the ravages of sin, disease and death which take their toll even upon the living, a toll particularly evident in a leper. All this is compounded by the social conventions surrounding the disease.

All told, the majority of translations opt for Jesus’ reaction as one of compassion in the encounter with the leper, shifting to one that moves to a stern warning in the realization that the man will do exactly what Jesus will ask him not to do: *See that you tell no one anything*. Instead of following Jesus’ word, the cured man tells everyone! And Jesus’ mission is thwarted as soon as it begins: “*It was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly*” (v. 45). The admonition in v. 43 would then have specific reference to this act coming after the leper had been made whole and was in a frame of mind to receive such a rebuke.

These are the problems caused by the minor attestation in manuscripts and Mark's relatively poor grammatical structures in Greek.

Jesus' Actions

The treatment of Jesus consisted of a gesture and a pronouncement. The touch of Jesus, which crossed the taboo of contact with a leper, was significant from two points of view. From the perspective of the leper it was an unheard-of act of compassion which must have moved him deeply and strengthened him in his conviction he had not asked for help in vain. From the perspective of Jesus' relationship to the cultic and ritual system, it indicated that he did not hesitate when the situation demanded. Jesus' touch and his sovereign pronouncement mean the same thing: *"I do will it. Be made clean."* This was not a priestly pronouncement, as is made clear in verses 43–44, but a declaration that healing would follow immediately and completely. The text describes an instantaneous radical healing which was visible to all who met the man.

In her commentary, Pheme Perkins makes an interesting point by asking if there would be a different attitude towards leprosy and Levitical requirements if you lived near Jerusalem or lived up north in Galilee. By way of a weak analogy, what would be our attitude if having been seemingly cured by a physician in our home town, we were told it was necessary to present ourselves to the infectious disease specialists at the National Institute of Health in Washington DC to receive the definitive declaration of the cure? How many of us would bother?

Later extra-biblical writings from Qumran show particular and meticulous concern with the details of the required one-week purification process after the declaration. Would we opt for taking the time and expense for what might amount in our minds as a "second opinion" when the evidence of the healing seems pretty clear.

This is why some scholars wonder if the now-cured leper ever had any intention of making the trip to Jerusalem: *"show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."*

Jesus' Command

Jesus commanded the former leper to be silent concerning his healing, and instructed him to show himself to the priests, who alone could declare him clean, and to offer the sacrifices prescribed in the Mosaic Law. The procedure to be followed was set forth in Lev. 14:2–31, and involved different offerings depending on whether the man was poor or prosperous. In the first century the man had first to show himself to a priest in his place of residence, after which he must go to Jerusalem to be pronounced clean and to make the prescribed sacrifices.

Jesus' demand that the man comply with Mosaic regulation is qualified by the words *"that will be proof for them."* This phrase may be interpreted differently depending on whether the testimony is considered to be positive or negative in character, and whether the people or the priests are in view. In keeping with the somber tone of the narrative it seems necessary to interpret the phrase in the negative sense demanded in the second instance where it occurs: *"as a testimony against them."* Scholarly investigation has shown that the concept "testimony" or "witness" here, as in many passages, has the meaning of incriminating testimony which may serve as evidence for the prosecution. "Testimony" means a piece of proof which may be recalled and which can become an accusation.

It is better to understand "them" as the priests, for it is they who must examine the man to determine whether the leprosy has been removed. Jesus' statement then means that if the priests establish that healing has taken place and accept the sacrifice for cleansing but fail to recognize the person and power through whom healing has come, they will stand condemned by the very evidence which they have supplied.

The healing of the leper demonstrated that God had done something new. If they neglect this sign or deliberately refer this gracious act to an evil origin, the accomplished sacrifice will testify against them on the day of judgment. It was, therefore, imperative that the man comply with Jesus' instruction. It was required for his own benefit, but more important, he was to provide the evidence of the new thing God was doing, which if met with unbelief would serve as incriminating evidence against the priests.

It is not known whether the man obeyed the injunction to show himself to a priest. He blatantly disregarded the injunction to silence, and assumed the posture of a missionary, declaring publicly over an extended area what he had experienced from Jesus. The text uses the word *kērussō* which is normally translated as "preaching." Did he do this out of joy? Was he placing a premium on a proper response to tell everyone about his benefactor? This would have been a proper response in a shame/honor society. Some scholars have speculated that given Mark's readership was a Gentile community, with less concern about the rituals of Temple Judaism, the honor/shame basis would carry more resonance.

In any case, the result was that Jesus' ministry in the synagogue was hampered, for he was no longer able to enter any town without encountering crowds of people waiting to throng one who could heal a leper, entreating healing and cures for themselves. This was not the mission Jesus had come to fulfill. When he withdrew to places of solitude the people pursued him, but they understood neither Jesus nor the significance of his withdrawal to a place which recalled the wilderness in which his submission to the Father had been affirmed.

Some Final Thoughts

Thomas Wright points out one element of human nature that might be in play. Some people just can't keep a secret. Jesus had his reasons for the man to follow the proscriptions of Leviticus. For a person who is blind or lame, their healing is quickly evident to us. For someone burdened with leprosy, most of the affected areas of the skin are not visible to the public - people might be rightly skeptical. But if the person had gone to Jerusalem, received the declaration of healing, and followed the purification ritual, and then returned. All doubt would be removed. But some people just can't keep a secret.

On another note, if a meta-narrative of all of Scripture is the desire of God to call all people to holiness and into his presence, then the story of the people of God is also one of restoration to a saving knowledge of God. When you read the second part of the *Book of Joshua* and throughout the *Book of Judges* you will often encounter the phrase that concludes the current generation had no knowledge of God. That same theme continues throughout the books of *Samuel*, *Kings*, *Chronicles* and in the testimony of the prophets. In each generation this is a need to restore people to the believing people.

In both the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the healing of the leper, people are restored from disease (which some believed was the word of the evil one) and restored to the proper place among the people of God. Both stories recount tales of isolation; both healings are accounts of reintegration into family and society - all begun with a touch.

A touch which technically makes Jesus ritually impure. A healing done "outside the line" of the official religion, which if the man skips the Jerusalem presentation, would likely raise more concern and ire within official Jerusalem leadership. No doubt the stories of the synagogue events had already been reported and this event will soon reach their ears.

This healing account serves to terminate the preaching tour of the Galilean villages and provides an entree into five accounts of controversy (Ch. 2:1–3:6). The story also establishes the surpassing nature of the salvation which Jesus brings, for while the Law of Moses provided for the ritual purification of a leper it was powerless to actually purge a man of the disease. In all of the OT only twice is it recorded that God had healed a leper (Num. 12:10 ff.; 2 Kings 5:1 ff.), and the rabbis affirmed that it was as

difficult to heal the leper as to raise the dead. The cleansing of the leper indicates the new character of God's action in bringing Jesus among men. Salvation transcends cultic and ritual regulations, which were powerless to arrest the hold that death had upon the living, and issues in radical healing.

Notes

Mark 1:40 leper: A disease in humans (also known as Hansen's disease) caused by the *bacillus Mycobacterium leprae*. This term "leprosy" is commonly used (more for convenience than medical accuracy) as a translation of Hebrew *šāra 'at* in the OT and Gk *lepra* in the NT. Scholars now generally agree that OT *sāra 'at* is not leprosy nor does it include it and that NT *lepra*, if it refers at all to leprosy, does so only as one among many skin conditions. [AYBD 277]

begged: In the Greek, *parakalōn*, which carries the meaning "request, urge; comfort" [EDNT 3:23]. Interestingly, the root is related to the work *Paraclete*, the expression used by St. John to mean the Holy Spirit. While its secular use is wide-ranging, within the NT its use is numerous, but its meaning is virtually limited to the matters of faith and salvation. On the lips of the leper the word hints at more than simple physical healing.

If you wish: Since the healing of leprosy was thought to require defined intervention, there is thought that the wording implies a realization of Jesus' messiahship, embodying the power and will of God.

Mark 1:41 moved with pity: *splanchnizomai* – have pity [EDNT 3:265]. A few MSS, of which D and some Old Latin renderings are the most important, read "moved with anger." Some argue that this is the harder reading, because it is more difficult to explain a copyist's move from compassion to anger. If it were original, then Jesus' anger would be set against the man's condition, not his request (Luke 13:16). But compassion is slightly more likely to be the original sense, given the overwhelming external spread of the MSS. Mark loved to note Jesus' emotions; here, Jesus acted graciously out of compassion for the man's plight. The healing would be extended with a symbolic touch, since Jesus' power to cleanse was greater than leprosy's power to stain (contrast 2 Kgs 5:1–14; Num 12:9–15). The significance of this is more clear in other Gospel texts (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22).

Mark 1:42 immediately: the cure is instantaneous at the word of Jesus

Mark 1:43 warning him sternly. The Gr. verb *embrimaomai* lit. means "to snort" or "be indignant" (Mark 14:5; John 11:33, 38). Jesus sternly restricted the public announcement of what had taken place while urging the leper to follow the law by showing himself to the priest so he could be declared clean (1:44; Lev 14:1–20). Mark notes such calls to silence with respect to demons (1:34; 3:12), those healed (1:43–44; 5:43; 7:36), and the disciples (8:30; 9:9).

Mark 1:44 that will be proof for them. This was a recognition of God's gracious work of healing through Jesus. The Greek also allows for the interpretation, "a testimony against them." In other spots where this expression appears, it is negative, meaning "against them" (6:11; 13:9). The meaning appears to be that the evidence of God's acting through Jesus (when the healed man offered a sacrifice) would stand as a testimony against the priests when they came to reject the reality that God was working through Jesus.

Mark 1:45 But the man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. The cleansed leper did not obey Jesus and Jesus got the publicity he had hoped to avoid. **publicize.** Interestingly, the man "preached" (*kērussō*) his testimony.

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