

# “Be Clean”

Mark 1:40-45

Naaman the Syrian, stricken with leprosy, is told to dip himself in the dirty little creek they call the Jordan River. It is not much of a “river”; and Naaman questions how effective that water could be in making him clean – and curing his leprosy. Again, like in Baptism, it is not the value of the water, the volume of the water, or the way in which the water is applied – it is the power and promise contained in the Word of God.

Naaman was cleansed in the water of the Jordan River because God spoke through His prophet Elisha and said, “Go and wash . . . and you shall be clean.” Naaman was angry that Elisha the prophet didn’t come out and make a big show and production, wave his hand, call on the name of the Lord and say, “Be healed!” Oh, how people love a show.

Instead, Elisha sends a messenger to tell him to dip himself in the Jordan seven times. Naaman has to trust the word of a messenger. He doesn’t even get to see the prophet. And the message, it’s too simple. Applying insignificant water attached with a promise brings real and lasting healing – permanent healing? Naaman was mad and has to be set straight by his servants.

The servants understand what a great and mighty act this washing is. They say, “It is a great word the prophet has spoken to you . . . He has actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean.’”

It is the simple messages from God that tend to be the most powerful. It is the simple messages that also tend to get dismissed because it seems too easy. “Wash and be clean?” Faith and trust in salvation get the most difficult challenge from our sinful nature when we don’t get to add to or help in the saving process.

Our sinful nature, our Old Adam, is always looking for a way to save himself, (or at least take some of the credit). This is why the healing of the leper in Mark’s Gospel is such an amazing event.

A leper comes, kneels before Jesus and says, “If you will, you can make me clean.” That is, “If you are willing, I know that you can heal me and make me clean.” This is a classic expression of faith. The leper knows that he has no right to make demands on God’s mercy. He displays perfect trust in the compassionate authority of Jesus.

This is like what we saw with the Roman Centurion who told Jesus, “I am not worthy to have you come under the roof of my house. Just say the word and I know he will be healed.”

The leper kneels before the Lord, and Jesus says, “Be clean.” And immediately the leprosy is gone, and he was clean. Even though Jesus told him not to tell anyone, this guy couldn’t keep his

mouth shut. Who can blame him? Do you have any idea how this healing changed his life?

Being a leper had consequences. You were “unclean.” That is, you were ceremonially unclean. You could not worship at the Temple. You could not attend synagogue. You could not enter into anyone’s home. If you stayed in your own home, all who were in your household fell under the same ban. You could not touch another person. If anyone approached you, you had to announce yourself as “unclean.” This was your life until the leprosy went away – which sometimes it did and other times it did not. But this was your life until you could show yourself to the priest and be declared “clean.”

The life of a leper was that everyone knew you had this disease. You had to announce it to everyone. Perhaps the worst part, beyond the isolation, was that the rabbis taught what we would call the “Theology of Glory.” If someone contracted leprosy, the assumption is that this is God’s divine judgment for sin. “Hey, did you hear? Ananias has leprosy. I wonder what he did to deserve that?”

So not only are you cut off from everyone, but the level of compassion from your neighbors would be low. And, as every person sins, as everyone breaks God’s commands, the leper would assume that the teachings of the rabbis were correct, and God is justly punishing me. The life of a leper was one of despair and loneliness.

There is a reason that, in God's Word and in theological terms, leprosy becomes synonymous with sin. Sin cuts you off, disturbs, and sometimes even ends relationships with family and neighbors. The guilt of sin can make you feel as if everyone is looking at you and saying, "I know what you have done." Guilt is an awful burden to bear. I don't think the average person understands what a great weight sin is.

But look at what Jesus does. He reaches out and touches this untouchable leper who is kneeling before Him, and He says, "Be clean." No person could touch him. He could not heal himself. This is what Christ came to do for him. This is what Christ came to do for you.

You come and kneel before your Lord. You have sinned. You are guilty. You have no right to make demands on God's mercy. But He willingly reaches out to you, touches you, and says, "Be clean."

It is not a big show or production. He sends a servant to share that Word with you. It seems unimpressive to those who think like Naaman and are looking for something other than the simple, clear message of God's salvation. It is the simple messages from God that tend to be the most powerful.

Wash and be clean in the waters of Baptism. Hear and believe the Word and promises of God. Eat and be filled at the table of the Lord. Amen.