

Cleanse the Lepers

Following the commands to heal the sick and cast out demons, we come now to Jesus' instruction to cleanse the lepers. In this chapter, we will consider what that might mean for us today. To begin with, it is not entirely clear whether these three statements divide the mass of hurting humanity into three separate camps, or whether Jesus' words are a way of expressing the width of the spectrum of human need. In other words, these areas may overlap.

To give an example, it may not always be clear where sickness ends and demonisation begins. Recently, two of us were praying with a person whose family had a history of breathing difficulties, asthma, bronchitis and the like. We discerned a spirit of infirmity, and with the agreement of all three of us, we then cast it out. There were mild writhing manifestations; then something seemed to leave, and peace followed. In the days to come, it would become clear whether this action was sufficient to deal with the problem, or whether further prayer was needed.

In our society, it is more acceptable to be sick than to have a demon. It is therefore tempting to play down the demonic. However, to ignore any evil spirit that was around would have been a mistake in this case. It therefore seems helpful to minimise any sense of shame at being demonised, as much as we can. If the enemy has got in, the best thing to do is not to cover it up, but to seek help and get him out.

If this is true for demonisation today, how much more was it true for leprosy in Jesus' day. The word used covers a wider range of skin problems than just leprosy, so the Good News Bible translates it, "dreaded skin disease". We might ask, how was this different from other sorts of sickness?

We will take it that the reason Jesus mentioned lepers as a separate category was because of the special needs lepers had. These would have included a sense of shame and fear.

The rendering "dreaded skin disease" highlights the element of fear. Such fear was hardly surprising. Lepers were to keep away from society. They were required to dress in a distinctive way, and to announce their presence so that people could keep clear. What a terrible moment it must have been to discover the first tell-tale spots. Fear and shame would have been a major factor as the truth dawned. How awful to suddenly become untouchable.

In our world, we have our categories of untouchables. One immediately thinks of those with AIDS, but there are other less apparent instances. Sometimes people with cancer try not to let their secret be known. They continue at work as if there was no problem. Probably there are other off-putting diseases that people prefer to keep hidden.

Jesus meets us where we are, whatever our problem. It may not be so easy to allow other believers in on our terrible secrets. Questions like "Can I trust them?" and "Will they let me down?" would naturally arise. We can see that followers of Jesus will need to be dependable and trustworthy if they are to be any use to today's lepers.

In addition to those with a physical problem akin to leprosy, we also have many people around us today who are physically fit, but who believe for one reason or another that they are untouchable, or unlovable, or worthless, or something similar. These people too are often afflicted by shame and fear, and desire to keep their weaknesses out of sight. Many try to protect themselves from situations which reveal their sense of inadequacy, either to themselves or to others. In order to survive, they adopt behaviour patterns to help themselves. For example, some people develop the skill of always putting a good face on things, pretending that their sunny exterior is their real self, rather than a mask. Sometimes the pain can remain buried away for many years.

Such survival tactics often appear to work up to a point. However, it seems safe to say that pain which is buried goes on causing problems, while pain that is dealt with overcomes problems. In addition, Jesus came to set the captive free. We are not called to learn how to cope with prison life. A cell is a cell, whether it is padded, or made of cold stone, or fitted out with easy chairs and comfy sofas. However comfortable we may have become with our disfigurement, as followers of Jesus, made in God's image, we are not to settle for second best but to escape from our prisons, and help others escape from theirs (Gen 1:26).

Jesus used to reach out and touch lepers (Matt 8:3). This in itself was a beautiful way of saying that they were valued and accepted by God. His touch also healed them. This underlined that with God, anything is possible (Luke 1:37). He called his followers to do the same. We will take it that believers today are to learn how to cleanse both categories of people - those with offensive diseases of the body, and those with wounds in the mind, the spirit and the emotions. We too are called to reach out and touch people whose lives are spoilt by shame and fear.

In order to do so, we will need to come to terms with our own shame and fear, as well as that of people in pain. Matthew 14, taken as a whole, is helpful in showing that fear is not just limited to unbelievers.

The chapter begins with Herod, who despite his power, was a fearful man. He was troubled by the words of John the Baptist, but feared the people, and chose to do what he knew was wrong rather than lose face in front of his guests (v3-10). He was an easy prey to occultic fears as well (v1-2). This reminds us how important it is to deal with all involvement with the occult, both in ourselves and others. If we don't, we will never fully eradicate fear.

In contrast, Jesus was not at all daunted by the fact that a crowd of over five thousand was stranded without food in a remote place. In multiplying the rolls and fishes, he demonstrated that God is generous and meets every need (v19).

The disciples, however, were of little faith. When they saw Jesus walking on water towards them later that night, they were terrified that this was some occult apparition, as Herod had thought earlier (v26). When they were reassured, Peter tried to trust Jesus by walking on the water towards him, but he too was overtaken with fear (v30).

Fear is widespread, even among disciples of Jesus. Perhaps part of the reason why believers have not always given as much help to people in trouble down the years as they might is due to fear of proving inadequate. All too often, we have had our eyes on the difficulties, or our own weakness, rather than on Jesus (v30).

If today's lepers to be cleansed, then, faith in Jesus needs to overcome fear. This is not beyond our reach, since only faith the size of a seed is required (Matt 17:20). This is true for both the person offering prayer, and the person receiving it. Both the goal and the method are the same: faith in Jesus.

In Matthew 14, the disciples had "little faith", whereas Herod had none. They all had fear; all needed inner healing. In the gospels, we can see Peter's survival method for dealing with his inadequacy. He used to play the man, brashly taking charge of the situation, and stepping in boldly (John 21:7 & 11). However, as Peter went along the road prepared for him by God, he received the power that he had lacked. Note his new-found ability to be led step by step by God in Acts 10. By the end of his life, he would even be able to allow others to bind him and lead him to a martyr's death, to the glory of God, in contrast with the way he failed to stand up for Jesus at the crucifixion (John 21:18-19).

In contrast to Peter, Herod portrays someone in need of inner healing who did not receive it. This was his loss. Had he remained Mr. Ordinary, the damage done by his unhealed hurts, although severe enough, might have been limited to his family circle. However, in his role as king, he inflicted all kinds of havoc on many people out of his weaknesses. In our passage he killed John the Baptist, described by Jesus as among the greatest men who had ever lived (Matt 11:11).

If we sidestep the inner healing we need, then our capacity to cause problems around us continues through life. The more influence we have, the greater the damage. There is a phrase "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". In the light of what we have learned, it might be more helpful to say that in a man who does not face up to his need for inner healing, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Most of us need inner healing in some form. Jesus demonstrates the ideal to us, as he does in everything else. When facing the greatest trial of his life, in which most people would be totally daunted, and any inner weakness would take over, Jesus was able to say that Satan had no hold on him (John 14:30). In other words, there was no part of Jesus' being, psychological, spiritual, mental,

emotional or physical, which did not totally depend on his heavenly father. He was whole. There was no weakness on which Satan could get a grip.

Many of us are familiar with Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. When the tree-like Ents were finally roused from their lethargy, they took vengeance on Saruman's stronghold, and they were able to uproot and tear down the even strongest walls and buildings with ease. However, the tower of Orthanc was so well constructed that it proved impossible to get any kind of grip on it at all, and it soon became clear that all that was happening was that the Ents were hurting and damaging themselves as they threw themselves upon it (Book 3, Chapter 9).

This strong tower, which had been built in earlier times, serves as a picture of the integrity of Jesus (cf Ps 18:2). There was no scope for Satan to gain a grip on him, nothing by which death could hold onto him (Acts 2:24). In our natural state, the rest of us share the inheritance of Adam that death has entered into all men (Rom 5:12 in Greek). However, the plan was that Jesus should reverse that (Rom 6:23), and become the first of a family of brothers, who share the divine likeness (Rom 8:29). It is also God's purpose that his followers should share in this victory over all the worst

that the forces of
darkness can do (Rev 17:14).

Most of us will have areas of darkness in our lives that need to be confronted. Some will require extensive prayer over the course of years.

Sean was 33 when he began to face up to barely-expressed inner fear and shame. With two Christian counsellors, he shared that he had discovered that he was an unwanted child. When the pregnancy had been discovered, abortion had been proposed by the doctor, but his mother had said no. Having been told this, Sean came to believe that he should never have existed, since he was a mistake. He had never shared this thought with anyone else before. He also mentioned his belief that everything he tried to do would fail sooner or later.

The counsellors explained that we exist by the mercy of God, not by the will of parents. Sean realised that he had believed a lie about himself. He confessed this to God, and resolved to believe the truth that God had called him into being before conception (Jer 1:5).

A few years later, it became clear that there was more to be done. In counselling, Sean found himself imagining himself lying in a coffin at his own funeral service. When questioned, he admitted that although he now knew in his mind that he was valued by God, he still had a lingering belief deep down that he was worthless. This would affect his life, in that when things went wrong, he would tend to jump to the conclusion that it was his own fault. He believed that if he had not been there, things might have gone better. This made him sad.

As this was discussed by the two counsellors, it seemed possible that when Sean's mother discovered that he was expected, she was horrified, and that her reaction of fear and shame had communicated itself to the life forming in the womb. After discussion by the three together, a curse of death and of non-being were broken in prayer. Once again Sean confessed that his feelings of worthlessness were lies from the devil. He determined to stand against them, with God's help. He then had to be sure to hold on to the truth that he was of value over the coming weeks and months.

In this story, we can see fear and shame gradually being replaced by faith and trust. If Sean is able to hold on to the truth he has learned and make it his own, established behaviour patterns based on self-blame should give way to healthier responses to problems, based on a truer grasp of reality deep inside Sean. In a knock-on effect, whereas before he could only relate well to the family dog, he should now find it easier to love other people. This is because

our actions follow on from our thoughts and beliefs.

As we have been reflecting, it seems that there is a class of people with a modern-day equivalent of leprosy, who will not only need healing from their hideous bodily diseases, but will also require inner healing along the lines we have been discussing. Others may not have a visible disease, but they feel just as vulnerable. Fear and shame will need to be replaced by love, hope and peace. Putting it another way, there is something to be said for seeing today's lepers as comprising a range of people struggling under fear and shame, whether their hurts are visible or invisible. All need the healing touch of Jesus through the care of believers.

As we begin to get involved in this area, we will tend to find our own inner hurts being exposed. There are an increasing number of books to help. Derek Prince's Blessing or Curse, You can Choose (Word, London, 1990), is helpful on the whole area of identifying curses, which are often based on negative beliefs, and how to break them.

One of the key marks of this ministry is the need to learn to confess our sins to one another, in the faith that we will be healed (James 5:16). There is healing power simply in the act of sharing our real, hurting selves in the right context. The organisation Wholeness Through Christ has developed a useful model of prayer-counselling, which recognises the inter-relation between inner wounds, bondages, sins and evil spirits. Once identified, these are submitted to God in prayer. The counsellee then has to "walk out" their healing, that is, learn new ways of thinking and living to replace the old survival patterns.

One word of caution. In our century, many methods of analysing human needs have arisen. The world of inner hurt has been opened up to scrutiny in a way past generations have not known. In attempting to follow Jesus, we need to hold onto the fact that Jesus said "cleanse" the lepers. The Christian contribution is to heal, in the power of the Holy Spirit, not just to analyse.

We have understood Jesus' instruction "cleanse the lepers" to include an added dimension over and above the words "heal the sick". Once again, we are aware that there is much to learn. The important thing is to get started, on ourselves, and on others. Be sensitive. It is best not to go around looking for people with needs. Nobody likes the feeling that others are prying into their affairs. Jesus ministered to people who approached him; we can copy this by asking God to send us the people he wants us to help. Be absolutely trustworthy with all information shared, and hand over to God everything that has taken

place at the end of the session.

How wonderful that believers today can follow Jesus in carrying out every part of the pattern he has revealed, just as Moses had copied the pattern revealed to him on Mount Sinai centuries earlier (Heb 8:5-6).