

I PRAISE YOU BECAUSE I AM *fearfully & wonderfully made*

CHANGING  HEARTS

Opening Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for creating us and calling us Your own. Thank You for giving us opportunities to study Your Word. Help us see others through Your eyes and love others through Your heart. Your Son Jesus shows us how to treat others around us. He shows compassion and love. Help us recognize how others may be feeling and give us caring hearts and welcoming arms. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Leprosy, or more correctly, Hansen's disease, has long been one of the most feared human conditions. Although treatable with modern medicine, and far less contagious than once thought, leprosy is still present in many world nations, especially among the poorest populations. "Leper colonies" are still in existence, and the word leper has become synonymous with outcast. It is often considered a derogatory term.

Because Hansen's disease was so feared, it was often misdiagnosed in the ancient world. Nearly any abnormality of the skin or scalp was considered leprous, and unless it healed and cleared up, the affected person was considered contagious and would be treated as a victim of the disease. It was a treatment we would describe today as drastic and possibly inhumane.

Important Note: *As we move through this study, please keep in mind that our intent is not to pass judgement on the God-ordained specifics of Levitical law in the Bible. We also do not consider disabilities an illness, or something someone can catch. **Rather, we hope to draw parallels between how people with leprosy were/are treated and how people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are often treated.** After all, disability rights advocates continue to fight against the institutionalization and segregation of people with disabilities.*

Read Leviticus 13:1-8

- There is no correct answer, but what stands out for you in this passage and why?

The chapter continues with other descriptions and rules about what people needed to look for and do in each situation. Scan through Leviticus chapters 13:9-44.

- What modern skin disorders might fall under the term leprosy?

Read Leviticus 13:45-46 and Numbers 5:1-4

- What do these passages teach you about how people with leprosy were treated in ancient times?

Once the label of leper was attached to a person, their life was inalterably changed unless they recovered from the disease. Relationships were severed and access to services denied. They were even excluded from temple worship. Other forms of ritual uncleanliness could be remedied through washings and sacrifices. However, if you had a chronic skin condition, there could be no return to normal life. This was even the case when the leprosy itself was not disabling, because the attitudes of the people imposed disability on all those labeled leprous. Further insult was added by making the ostracized individual responsible for avoiding contact with others and spreading the uncleanliness.

Read 2 Kings 7:3-11

- What caused the four men to seek out the Syrian camp?
- Even though they were treated differently, were they differently abled than the gatekeepers of the city?

Read 2 Kings 5:1

- What do you notice about this passage? (Look at the location of the word leprosy.)
- What does this imply about Naaman's abilities?

Naaman was a respected military leader despite the fact he had the label of leprosy, because his Syrian culture did not stigmatize his disease. The Syrians did not follow the rules set in the Bible. Naaman was given the opportunity to fulfill his role in the Syrian army, and was obviously very successful. Having leprosy had no effect on his abilities and no limitations were imposed on him by society.

- Discuss how people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been treated in the recent past.
- Are there similarities between the Biblical treatment of people with leprosy and those with disabilities in the recent past? Today?
- Do you think cultural and societal attitudes are changing? If so, discuss how.
- Do you think there is room for additional improvement and growth? If so, what do you think is needed?

Read Luke 5:12-13 and Luke 17:11-13

- How are these accounts similar? What are the differences?
- In Luke 5, what request does the man with leprosy make of Jesus?
- What does Jesus' method of healing tell us about his attitude toward leprosy and the uncleanliness associated with it?

Notice the man asked, not to be cured, but to be cleansed. This speaks to the heavy burden imposed by societal exclusion. Jesus "stretched out his hand and touched..." (ESV) the man, healing the leprosy and thereby making the man ritually clean.

- What does the fact that Jesus touched the man before healing him mean to you?
- What does this tell you about how Jesus views His kingdom?
- Why do you think Jesus instructed the man to show himself to a priest?

Jesus ignored the biblical practice of exclusion by physically touching the man even though, by doing this, Jesus could have been considered ritually unclean. Exclusion, however, has no place in God's kingdom. Jesus' treatment of this man models a life of compassion and kindness.

- Who comes to your mind as someone who lives a life of compassion and kindness?
- You do not need to say this out loud, but who comes to your mind as someone who may need compassion and kindness?

Although Jesus ignored some of the biblical practices, He did instruct the man to go see the priests and be declared clean. By doing so, the man fulfilled the Levitical law in the Bible. Jesus recognizes that the man's restoration to community was still dependent on cultural bias. Even though the man did not need a priest's declaration of health, Jesus knew the man needed to be accepted back into the community. Seeing the priests was the only way back to acceptance.

- Think about times you are at church. Do you feel accepted there?
- Do you feel accepted as an equal? Why or why not?
- How do you know you are accepted?
- Do people show you compassion and kindness?
- Think about times you have seen people with disabilities in your church or community. Did you accept them as equal members?
- How do they know you accept them?

As those who represent God's kingdom today, we should receive all who have been cleansed or wish to be cleansed in the waters of Holy Baptism.

- What can you and your church do to be more accepting of others, especially those who may seem marginalized or treated differently?
- How is your church recognized as a place of compassion and kindness?