



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew -- TRANSCRIPT

“The Cleansing of the Leper, or Christ both Powerful and Good,” Matthew 8:1-4

For the Scripture Reading, I want to turn to a passage in the Old Testament, in the Book of Leviticus, chapter 14 verse 1 through verse 8, and then we shall turn to the Gospel of Matthew and read verses 1 through 4 of chapter 8. So first, Leviticus chapter 14, verse 1 through verse 8. And while you're finding this passage in the Book of Leviticus, let me just remind you that the two chapters in the Book of Leviticus, chapters 13 and 14, have to do with leprosy and the instructions that are given in the word of God concerning the ritual of the leper's cleansing. And we're reading in chapter 14, which follows the 13th chapter in which certain instructions are given for the recognition of the disease of leprosy. Now, in chapter 14, Moses gives us instructions concerning the law of the leper's cleansing. (Later on, in the message, I want to refer to this passage, so I hope you will notice, particularly, the ceremony Moses sets forth for the leper's cleansing.)

Now, reading in verse 1 of chapter 14,

“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ‘This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing: He shall be brought unto the priest: And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper; Then shall the priest command to take

for him that is to be cleansed two birds alive and clean, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop: And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water: As for the living bird, he shall take it (that is, the priest shall take it), and the cedar wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water: And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose into the open field. And he that is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean: and after that he shall come into the camp, and shall tarry abroad out of his tent seven days.”

The remainder of the chapter gives further details for the cleansing of the leper and also details concerning his right to worship, and then his right to enter into the congregation of the Nation Israel.

We turn now to Matthew chapter 8, the chapter that follows the great Sermon on the Mount. And, the evangelist, in the first four verses, a great sermon having been finished, writes,

“When he was come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him. And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, ‘Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.’ And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be thou clean.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus saith unto him, ‘See thou tell no man; but go thy way, show thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.’”

May the Lord’s blessing rest upon the reading of his inspired word.

The subject for today in our continuing exposition of the Gospel of Matthew is “The Cleansing of the Leper, or Christ both Powerful and Good.” The great collection of sayings which is contained in the Sermon on the Mount is followed by a great collection of doings on the part of our Lord. Matthew chapter 8 and Matthew chapter 9 are known for the account that they give of the miracles of the Lord Jesus. So we move from his words to his deeds, perhaps indicating for us, too, that his words are more important than his deeds, if we may so brazen as to suggest some kind of evaluation between them.

As Mr. Scroggy has said, “His teaching is more important than his touch. He has spoken as the incarnate wisdom of God in chapters 5, 6 and 7, and now he will act as the incarnate power of God, reminding us that he is, both, the wisdom of God and the power of God, and that there was no man who has ever spoken as the Lord Jesus has spoken, nor has their ever been or ever will be a man who has acted as the Lord Jesus has acted.”

There are nine miracles in chapters 8 and 9 of the Gospel of Matthew. Three of them are miracles of healing. Three of them are miracles of power. And three of them are miracles of restoration. They are the credentials of the King. The miracles are not designed to bring us to faith in Jesus Christ. Miracles do not bring to faith; the Holy Spirit brings to faith. The miracles were designed to identify the Messiah, and these miracles had been prophesied in the Old Testament. They are miracles by which an Israelite who was in touch with the Holy Spirit might be enabled to identify the Deliverer.

In the Old Testament, in passages such as Isaiah chapter 29, verses 18 and 19, we have these passages that prophesy what the Messiah would do. And your covenant, chapter 29, verse 18 and 19 reads, “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and darkness. The meek shall also increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.”

And then in the 35th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, and the 5th and 6th verses we read, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.”

And in chapter 61, in verse 1 of this same prophecy of Isaiah, we read, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek. He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” So when we read in the Book of Matthew in chapters 8 and 9 of this string of miracles which the Lord Jesus performed, we are to understand them as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that describe for us the work of the Messiah when he would come.

Later, in this same gospel, when John the Baptist comes into some doubt concerning the ministry of the Lord and sends messengers to him asking, “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” the Lord Jesus said, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see. The blind receive their sight; the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. The dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.” That answers the question, “Art thou he that should come?” He is identified, then, by the miracles that he performed. But we only come to faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He carries out, then, his work as a minister of the work of the circumcision, confirming the promises made unto the fathers, and thus fulfills the law.

He had said back in chapter 5 and verse 17 of the Gospel of Matthew, “I have not come to destroy the law; I have come to fulfill it.” And here, he continues to fulfill it in the miracles he performs. We look now at this miracle which is the first recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the miracle of the cleansing of the leper.

The connection of the narrative with that which precedes is given for us in the first verse of the 8th chapter: “When he was come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him.” That’s a generic statement. We are not to understand that the cleansing of

the leper occurred in the midst of this great multitude. That is evident because he tells the leper, after he has been cleansed, to go his way, and to tell no man about that which had happened. If it had been done in the midst of the great crowd, everyone would know. So it is evident that that is a general statement, and now the cleansing of the leper forms a special work of healing done largely, it is evident, in private.

The leper is simply described in Matthew as a leper, but Luke, in his description – and Mark describes this event, too – speaks of him as a man “full of leprosy.” So evidently, he was a man in a miserable, hopeless condition when he came into the presence of the Lord Jesus. If I may just exercise my imagination for a moment, I’m going to assume that he was in the crowd, standing off by himself – for no one would stand by a leper; and he was not allowed to stand by someone – that he was standing off in the crowd but heard our Lord in the message that he gave.

And he heard him, and there came over his spirit the inevitable impression, this is the rabbi for me. And when he heard him in the 7th chapter say, “Ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you,” he came into the presence of the Lord Jesus with the conviction that this is the rabbi for me, and if he says ask and seek and knock, I shall ask, and I shall seek, and I will knock—perhaps I shall find. And he comes into the presence of the Lord Jesus with this marvelous petition on his lips, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.”

Now I think it is important for us, in understanding the significance of this narrative, to understand the character of leprosy. Among the many Old Testament passages that speak of the disease of leprosy, Leviticus chapter 13 and chapter 14 is the most prominent. It’s doubtful that there is any disease that so completely reduces the human being in his body to so foul and hideous and repulsive a wreck.

It might begin with little nodules which go on to ulcerate. The ulcers develop a foul discharge. The eyebrows fall out. The eyes become staring. The vocal cords become ulcerated, and the voice becomes hoarse, and the breath wheezes. The hands

and feet always ulcerate. Slowly, the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerate growths. That form of leprosy usually lasts about nine years, and it ends in mental decay, a coma, and ultimately death.

There is another form of this disease, called by modern physicians, Hansen’s Disease. It might begin with the loss of all sensation in the loss of some part of the body. The nerve trunks are affected; the muscles waste away. The tendons contract until the hands are like claws. There follows the ulceration of the hands and feet and then comes the progressive loss of fingers and toes until in the end, a whole hand or a whole foot may drop off. The duration of this kind of leprosy is from 20 to 30 years. It’s a kind of progressive death in which a man dies by inches.

Now I know, after that learned discussion, all of the physicians in the audience are going to wonder where I got my medical training [laughter], but I assure you I was just quoting from an authority.

Leprosy is the great illustration in the New Testament of sin. It’s the great illustration in the whole of the Bible of sin. There are at least eight or nine different ways in which leprosy illustrates, in this physical sphere, sin in the spiritual sphere.

It is, first of all, an inward disease. And the description that is given in Leviticus, especially stresses that fact. It speaks of the plague that is “in him.” It’s a disease that arises very mysteriously, and it’s origin seems to be unknown. And sin affects the spirit of a man in just that way. There are degrees of its manifestation just as there are degrees in the manifestation of sin. There is first secret sin, like an ulcer in the midst of the body, skinned over with hypocrisy. Then there’s open sin which bursts forth into manifest villainy. The former, one of the Puritans says, is corruption; the second is eruption. One sin is a step to another more heinous, for not observing is followed by not remembering, and forgetfulness – a duty – draweth on disobedience and rebellion. And then finally there is confirmed sin, and that is rank poison which destroys the man.

Leprosy is a loathsome disease. Not only is it an inward disease, but it’s loathsome. One can feel it, and one can smell it. A very foul odor is given off by the person who has leprosy. And furthermore, one can hear it, because it affects the vocal cords, and the voice of the individual become hoarse and wheezing, and even in it’s manifestation in that way, is a vile and polluting kind of disease.

I’m reminded of the statement made by the Prophet Isaiah in the first chapter of his book, and there he refers to Israel’s sin in a form that reminds me of this disease, leprosy. We read, as he describes the condition of Israel, “Why should ye be stricken anymore? Ye will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot, even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores. They have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment.” That’s Isaiah’s description of the Nation Israel.

It is, thirdly, a separating disease, for when the leper is diagnosed as having leprosy, it is required that he be separate from the Nation Israel. He had to go outside the camp, outside the community of the covenant people, and he had to dwell outside of it. It’s the Old Testament picture of a person who is dead in trespasses and sins. And every one of us, of course, have this great disease of spiritual leprosy. Every one of us has the inward disease. Every one of us, in us, apart from the redeeming ministry of the Lord Jesus, is loathsome in our sin, and every one of us has been separated from God. The rabbis flung stones at the lepers. They hid from them. And it was even said of them they would not even buy an egg in a street down which a leper had recently passed.

And finally, it was, so far as Israel knew, an incurable disease. There are some who think that Hansen’s Disease, which is generally identified as leprosy, is really a much a weaker form of the kind of leprosy found in the Old Testament. Leprosy, incidentally, was not generally contagious, not very contagious at all. Therefore, the exclusion from the community of Israel was not in order that others might not get the disease from them, but rather, a ceremonial thing. In other words, it was designed to teach, and leprosy was

God’s great way of teaching us the vileness of human sin. He could pick every disease as an illustration of sin, for all of our diseases are illustrations of sin. All of them are steps along the road to ultimate death because of sin. But leprosy almost beautifully expresses that.

So, here in the New Testament, then, we come to the healing of a leper. Incidentally, so far as we know from the reading of the Old Testament, there were lepers what were healed. For example, Naaman the Syrian was healed. But Naaman was not an Israelite, and consequently the regulations concerning the healing of a leper, the law of the leper’s cleansing, would not have been applied to him. But we do not have any record of anyone in the New Testament being healed of leprosy for about 1500 years before the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Now that’s an amazing thing, and of course it is a very purposeful thing. It is designed to illustrate two things: that this disease is an incurable disease, and in its incurability expresses the fact that the wages of sin are death. But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. And the amazing fact of the healing of a leper appears in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. And this is not the only healing, for later he heals ten lepers. And finally, we read in the Book of Acts of many priests coming to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and I’m inclined to think that it’s because they had to deal with the lepers that were cleansed by the Lord and the apostles, and through the testimony that came to them they themselves came to faith in the Lord Jesus. But most significantly, this is a biblical picture of sin and guilt.

I want to say just a few things about that for a moment, because it seems to me that in our preaching, in the whole of the 20th Century, we have lost the note of stress upon human sin. And we certainly have illustrations enough in our private and public lives of the necessity for stressing human sin.

The sense of guilt, which is the sense that each of us possesses in his inmost man, manifests itself through the feeling of remorse. Remorse has two ingredients: the

conviction that sin ought to be punished; there is something down within the heart of every one of us that says sin ought to be punished. And we have it even in unbelievers confessing, unwittingly, that sin ought to be punished. And then, secondly, the conviction that sin will be punished. In the bosom of every transgressor is a trembling apprehension of future judgment. Sophistry, philosophy, psychology find it impossible to bribe or silence this conviction down in our hearts that there is going to be a judgment for our sin.

And this very remorse, which grips the inward part of a man, becomes present as a sentence of death within him. The sinner fears because he feels that he is already condemned. Now, that seems to imply two things. One, sin entails hopeless bondage to sin, because the law makes no provision for pardon. Read the Old Testament law through in its moral side, and you will find no provision for the forgiveness of sin. And then, all self-devised satisfactions are felt to be delusive and worthless. We cannot do anything that brings forgiveness of ourselves.

So that when a man sins, he’s separate from God – his separation, his guilt, only deepens – and as his guilt deepens, he separates himself more from God. He flees more from the presence of God. So that one sin entails hopeless bondage to sin. The guilt widens the breach, and he continues to run, just like Adam in the Garden of Eden when the Lord God came down into the garden; after one sin, Adam is hiding. And the remainder of the life will be one, long attempt to escape the presence of God. One sin entails hopeless bondage to sin.

Now when this remorse comes, that only hardens a man’s heart, just as Adam, after he had sinned, his heart was more hardened than before. One sin leads to a hardened heart, and a hardened heart leads to more sin, and so there is a constant progression from sin to hardening, to sin to hardening, to sin to hardening, to sin to hardening, so that there is hopeless bondage to sin. Malignity arises in the heart against the law, against God in heaven, and against everything that is holy and right. It becomes a career. And a frown rests thereafter on the eternal judge in heaven.

And since the state brought on by one sin is hopeless, the punishment must be endless. And if we continue to sin, we must continue to die. And the deeper we plunge in guilt, the deeper we sink in death. And the future will always be blacker than the present, the night ahead more appalling than anything behind. Hell becomes thick darkness that waxes blacker and blacker and blacker for ever. That is the progress of sin. And what must sin be if it is capable of producing such agony?

And this circumstance of the effect of sin in the future adds inconceivably to its terrors, because in the future, sin will act with more intensity. When we enter into the life beyond this life, we shall see more clearly. We shall see more immediately. We shall see more intensively. And if we have the concept of guilt, and the sense of remorse over guilt, and the sense of impending judgment, and the sense of impending death, how much greater will that be in the life that is before us, in the eternal day? And in addition, we will have constantly before us, at every moment, the crimes of our whole lives. We shall watch them all face to face, and see them all in a moment. There is nothing secret, nothing hidden in that day. And so confront our whole past continually.

We’ve often heard the stories of people who, at the point of death, had their whole lives pass before them. That became a very vivid picture which they never forgot. That’s an anticipation, evidently, of what lies before us in the eternal state. Therefore, remorse in the future world will have unspeakable power to confront us and torment us, and as Professor Thornwell said, “In the morning, the lost will say, would God that it were evening; and in the evening, they will say, would God it were in the morning.”

That’s sin. That is what we each inherit as a child of Adam. That is what we each have burning in our hearts, and that’s what we feel in our minds when we tremble in the light of the judgment that is to come. And it is that which Jesus Christ has come to redeem us from. The leper. What a vivid picture of the nature of sin: full of leprosy; full of sin – that’s every individual. That is you, and that is I.

Luke, I say, accentuates the hopelessness. He reminds us of the great passage in Romans chapter 5 verse 6 through verse 11 in which the apostle states that before we came to the knowledge of Christ, we were weak. We were without strength. We were ungodly, and we were enemies. That’s the counterpart of leprosy in the body. The sad fact is that there are so many who do not realize their danger.

There’s a humorous story told of a man who fell out of the window of a 40-story building. As he fell by the 10th floor, he happened to see a friend looking out of the window, and he shouted out, “Everything’s alright, so far!” [Laughter] And unfortunately, there are many people, perhaps some in this audience, who are in the same spiritual condition. In the grace of God, you have lived for years in rebellion against him. You have lived with spiritual leprosy in your bones. It has begun to manifest itself in your acts. But you really think that it’s possible—you really think that somehow you can escape this sense of impending doom which lies deep down in your heart. You’re optimism is just as justified as the man who passed the 10th floor. Everything is fine until the landing takes place, but then all things change.

The cry of the leper is a most interesting cry. He comes with this plaintive cry for help, and I think it must have seemed even more piteous than it does to us, because we cannot hear the voice with which he gave it. But it must have been hoarse, wheezing, and difficult, and you can imagine him coming, falling down before the Lord Jesus, worshipping him, Matthew says, and crying out, Lord, if you will, you are able to cleanse me. It is a cry of confidence in the power of the Lord Jesus.

Now it is evident in the light of that word, worshipped, which is always used of one’s attitude toward the gods, that this leper has come to regard the person of our Lord Jesus very highly. He has come to think of him as a person who is worthy of worship. He has, by the grace of God been brought to the sense of the deity of the Lord Jesus.

Now we did not read that he had fallen on his face to worship him. We might have said the term, lord, means simply, “sir,” because it doesn’t mean that in the New

Testament. But the fact that he worshipped him means that we must give the term “Lord” the fullest of senses. He has a confidence in the power of the Lord Jesus: “Lord, if you will, you are able to cleanse me.”

Now some have read this as a cry of doubt of the goodness of our Lord. Lord if you will—but we’re not sure if you really have that goodness within you to will my healing or are able to cleanse me. And so some have read this as if we have, here, a doubt of the goodness of our Lord.

But if it is true that he regards him as God incarnate – calls him Lord – then we must give the term, will, not the sense of “wish,” but the sense of “will,” and this verb often has the sense of “will.” In fact, it is one of the characteristic New Testament words for the term, will, in the sense of the will of God. So what he has come upon his lips with is not a cry of the doubt of the goodness of our Lord, but it’s a cry of acquiescence to his sovereignty. Lord, if you will; if it is your will, I know you have the power to heal. I know that you are God, but I’m not certain that it is your will that I be healed.

It’s the same kind of attitude with which the Lord prayed in the garden. “O Lord, my Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless not my will, but Thine be done.” And so, the leper has come acquiescent in the sovereignty of God, a profound insight into the being of the Lord Jesus, and also a profound insight into the purposes of God. How has the leper come to this? Why, he has come to it by the working of the effectual grace of the Holy Spirit in his heart.

No man ever comes back to God from the state of sin apart from the divine redemption. As I’ve said, one sin leads to a life of rebellion against God, endless, continuing separation from God, and finally endless punishment, for the man who commits a sin becomes a bond-slave of sin. So when a man comes around into the presence of God himself, and acknowledges his goodness and his greatness and his deity and requests, in humility, the benefits of divine power and grace, it’s evident that God has already been working in his heart and soul. No man ever comes to God apart from the

work of the Holy Spirit. That is why our salvation, from beginning to end, is the work of God.

Don’t you see how blasphemous it is to think that we can begin the work of salvation in our own hearts, by the uninitiated activity of our wills? It’s a denial of the nature of sin and a denial of the nature of divine salvation. So faith is given, and you can see that this is merging into a kind of faith of discipleship. He’s willing to submit to the will of God in his life.

And you know, this is even more remarkable when we remember that up to this time, no leper, so far as we know, had been cleansed. Back in chapter 4 and verse 24 of the Gospel of Matthew, we had read about the healing ministry of the Lord Jesus: “And his fame went out through all Syria, and they brought unto him all sick people who were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those who were possessed with demons, and those who were epileptics, and those who had the palsy, and he healed them”—but no lepers.

And it might well have been the conviction of some, well, he’s able to perform all these other miracles, but you’ll notice that there is no leper that has been healed. And so the leper’s faith becomes even more remarkable in the sense that he is asking for something that, insofar as the Scriptural record is concerned, has not taken place for over a thousand years.

The cleansing is described in the 3rd verse. Jesus put forth his hand, and touched the kneeling and worshipping leper. Incidentally, that was the attitude that one took before kings. And in this attitude of kneeling, and in this attitude of worship, he heard and felt the tremendous activity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we shouldn’t pass by those words, “and he stretched forth his hand and touched him.” I think it is impossible to expound the significance of that expression: he reached forth, or put forth his hand, and touched him. The leper had almost forgotten

what the touch of a hand was like. He had lived, since his disease was manifest, apart from others.

Thee law of Moses required that when leprosy was diagnosed as the disease that one possessed, he was to go outside the camp. He was to tear his clothes. He was to keep his head uncovered. He was to cover his upper lip. And as he walked the streets he was to shout, constantly, “Unclean, unclean, unclean, unclean!” so that no one would inadvertently come near him.

Whenever he walked down the street, everyone moved aside. He never was able to stand in a crowd. He could never hear a meeting such as this. He could never hear a message in the crowd. And at night, he had to go outside the gate, outside the camp of Israel, and dwell out by himself. For years, this leper had never known what the touch of a hand felt like. He had never known the embraces of his wife and his children. And as he walked in the crowds, there was this chilling withdrawal from him.

But now, the Lord Jesus stretches his hand across what someone has called, the dreary gulf, and lets him feel once more the sweetness of a warm and gentle touch. Mr. McLaren says, “It was the half-cure. It was the complete clearing away of the last film of the cloud of doubt as to the will of Jesus. It answered the “if” by something that spoke louder than any word. Lord, if you will, is it really the will of God that I be healed? And the Lord Jesus put out his hand and touched him. No rabbi would have dared to touch him, but he put out his hand and touched him, and then he spoke the thrilling words: I will; be thou clean.

Now I think there is a deep meaning in this. It’s entirely possible that the Lord Jesus, stretching forth his hand and touching him, touching the rotting filth of that leprosy, is designed to illustrate for us the significance of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, because after all, what did he take when he came into our society? Well, he took human nature, but of course, you say, well, that’s human nature apart from sin. That’s right, it was human nature apart from sin. But we read in Scripture that as the time drew near for

the Lord Jesus to suffer, we find him crying out, as I said a moment ago, “O my God, if it be possible, let his cup pass from me.”

And then we read in the Apostle Paul the meaning of that cry of the Lord Jesus, “He hath made him to be sin for us, him who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God for him.” And so the Lord Jesus, in taking our sin, takes all of the ultimate filth and loathsomeness and also the penalty and condemnation of our guilt upon him. He put forth his hand and touched him. A parable, perhaps, of the incarnation, and it certainly speaks to us as the stanza of the hymn has it: “He saw me ruined in the fall, yet loved me notwithstanding all.” And those words, “I will; be thou clean,” they are majestic in their brevity. And the claim that they make: I will; it is my will; be clean.

All of the gospel writers say this, “Immediately, his leprosy left him.” Straightway, our text has it, or immediately. The suddenness is important. The suddenness describes it in such a way that we will not have any kind of confusion over the nature of this healing. It is a divine miracle. It is not a miracle like the supposed miracles performed by an Oral Roberts, or a Katherine Koolman. This is the kind of striking miracle that has the striking, patent sign of deity resting upon it.

Immediately, he was cleansed. The voice that was hoarse and wheezy becomes clear and firm. The hands and feet that were rotting now become perfectly healthy. The inner part of the man is now cleansed. He stands before the Lord Jesus whole.

The mocking cures of modern, so-called faith healers, are a travesty of the healing of the word of God. I’ve often wondered why it is that the healers do not set up their tents in Carville, Louisiana at the National Leprosarium and settle the problems of the lepers that are there. As far as I know, they do not visit that place.

Incidentally, the miraculous element in Christianity is a necessary part of it. And a non-miraculous Christianity makes nonsense of the New Testament, and makes the church’s faith inexplicable.

The command of the Lord that follows is most interesting, because it introduces us to this Old Testament ceremony. He speaks to this man who has been cleansed immediately, and says to him, “Go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded as a testimony unto them.” Now this prohibition that introduces it is designed to prevent a false conception of the Messiahship. Israel had not yet been brought to realize that he was the Messiah who must suffer before he brings the kingdom. They thought he would bring the kingdom, and so he seeks to obviate their going about, saying, the king is here, he’s going to defeat the Russia—the Romans, in the immediate future. And so, he tells the leper to be quiet.

Incidentally, Mark says, the leper couldn’t be quiet. He went out and told people. That’s a beautiful illustration of the fact that when a man has experienced the healing power of the Lord Jesus Christ, it’s impossible to keep the mouth closed. Well, he disobeyed the Lord, but he went to the priest, and he asked the priest to perform the proper ceremony in order to be pronounced clean.

I can just imagine the priest. He’s just like a young preacher who’s been given messages in theological seminary about how to perform a marriage, and yet he’s never performed one. And so when he comes into a church, and someone asks him to be the officiating person at a wedding, he says that he will gladly do it, until he discovers that the first wedding that he’s to perform is not the usual kind of wedding.

It’s not the small, intimate kind of wedding that he had hoped he would have for his first one, but this is a very prominent wedding in the community. There will be probably eight to twelve bridesmaids and groomsmen and ushers, and not only that, there will be a flower girl and a ring bearer, and a maid and a matron of honor. And furthermore, word has come to him that the mother of the bride is a kind of shrew, and the wedding consultant is known as a person who has a vixenous temper, and this is his first ceremony. And it’s amazing that he gets through it. [Laughter]

I can imagine the priest when the leper came. He said, “You recognize me, do you not?” says the leper. The priest looks at him, “I’m not sure I do.”

“Oh yes, I lived right outside the wall, over there. There’re eight of us, and I’m one of them. But Jesus touched me and look, I am clean! Now I want you to offer the sacrifice that’s supposed to be offered. Jesus told me to come to you.”

And the [priest] has never performed such a sacrifice. No one has been cleansed. I can see the priest shouting back, “Bring me the manual!” [Laughter] And the manual comes, and it’s left out of the manual. And he says, “Where in the world is it said that we are to do something?”

Finally, after a lengthy time, the leper is still standing there, they find it back in Leviticus chapter 13 and chapter 14, and have to go through the ceremony. And they have to go out and find the two birds. And one of the birds is brought in and is killed. The blood is caught in a little basin, and running water is put in it because it must be sprinkled seven times over the person who has been cleansed. And so the blood is mixed with the water, suggestive of the cleansing of the guilt and filth of sin. And the other live bird is taken in the hand with the hyssop and the cedar, and it is dipped into the blood. The priest dips it into the blood, and seven times the blood and water is sprinkled over the leper, in order that he may be pronounced clean.

And then the bird is released, and it flies off into the sky, suggestive of the two aspects of our salvation, that through the Lord Jesus there is a satisfaction of sin made in the shedding of blood, a penal satisfaction. And furthermore, it suggests the truth of substitution, for it is the bird that suffers death, and not the leper. It is designed to represent his condition as a dead individual. And then the bird that flies off into the sky represents the freedom that we have from the guilt and power of the condemnation of sin. What a beautiful picture of the two aspects of the saving work of the Lord Jesus, who has delivered us from our offenses, and raised us again in testimony to our justification.

Now, no doubt, the priest didn’t understand all of that at that time, and no doubt the leper did, but he came to understand as he reflected upon the fact that he was dead, and now he is, through the blood of the Redeemer that is to come, cleansed.

A preacher once asked a little boy, “Do you believe there is anything that God cannot do?” The little boy said, “Yes, there is something God cannot do. He cannot see my sins through the blood of Christ.” And that is true, for the person who hides under the cleft of the rock, Jesus Christ, has a full and complete salvation, and the freedom from sin.

Well, this was, of course, designed to bring people to the conviction that he was the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah, for he heals the lepers. “He breaks the power of cancel sin, he sets the prisoner free; his blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me,” the Christian testifies.

So I ask you this morning, have you put your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus? Has there come a time when you have recognized sin, its guilt, its condemnation, and has there come a time in which you’ve felt no hope outside of divine enablement, and has the Holy Spirit brought you in personal trust to the Redeemer who died for sinners. If you’re here in the audience, and you’ve never believed in our Lord Jesus, as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, I invite you to put your trust in him.

Come to him. Come to him who has offered complete salvation. What a terrible thing to come into an auditorium like this and hear what sin is in the human heart, and know that it is there in my own heart, and leave without the deliverance that Jesus Christ offers and gives. Come. Come to Christ. Put your trust in him, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, and know what it is to be clean.

And as the [priest] had pronounced over [the leper] the fact that he had been cleansed, so in faith, one enters into the relationship that brings justification before a holy God. May God, in his grace, bring you to that decision. Shall we stand for the benediction?

“The Cleansing of the Leper” by S. Lewis Johnson
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[Prayer] Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who healed the leper, the love of our great God, who sent the Son, the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit who brings the lost to Christ be the possession of all who are in this auditorium.

O Father, work in the hearts of the men and women who are here.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.