

# Jesus Touches the Living Dead

Matt Farey

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**Matthew 8**

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**From Saul To David**

I wanted to have both the last and the first readings, because the backdrop to this exhortation, this very simple exhortation, is the difference, really, between David and Saul, the attitudes that they both had, and I'm thinking here of Saul's double mindedness as opposed to David single-mindedness, and if we keep that in the back of our minds as we go on, I hope that will set the scene as it were, for the comments, but the the comments will all be taken for Matthew.

As I say, it's a very simple exhortation today, and I'm going to focus just on one parable, one *healing* parable, the healing of the leper, and try and appreciate, as we gloss, as the Bible so often does, it glosses over just so much depth that's so wonderful to search out. And I hope that we can gain something by doing that. A bit gory at times, but I hope that that is *real*, that brings the *reality* of what this man was going through and the reality that we're going through. So I'll try and keep that to a minimum, but *enough* so that we get an appreciation for his suffering.

### **Leprosy in Today's World**

And it's not just him that suffers, three out of every one hundred thousand, two hundred thousand every year suffer from leprosy. In this country there ought to be based on those numbers, two thousand people, but there are probably only hundreds each year who get diagnosed, and those parts of the world where there is no medical help, it's as bad as perhaps we see it in this story. So we'll just look at this man's background then, at what he was going through, the description of what he was suffering, and we can do that first by looking at some of the regulations in Leviticus thirteen and what what was done to somebody, what they had to go through if they were discovered to have a rash or swelling on their body or a bright spot.

### **Leprosy Then, Under The Law of Moses**

“The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘When a man has on the skin of his body, a swelling or rash or bright spot and it becomes an infection of leprosy than he should be brought to Aaron the priest or one of his sons.’”

In other words, anyone who gets leprosy, take them straight to the priest. The priest will examine them. And if the hair has turned white, then the infection, perhaps it’s deeper, and there might be more than a superficial problem because the roots of the hair are being affected

“and the priest shall look at him and pronounce him unclean.”

Now, if someone did that to us today, it wouldn’t make much difference would it, nobody would know ,it’s an anonymous society, but in those days it was very different.

But if the bright spot is white and doesn’t appear to be deeper and the hair on it hasn’t turned white, the priest shall isolate him outside the camp for seven days and see what happens. The priest will look him after that time and if in his eyes the infection has not changed”

in his determination, and it hasn’t spread, during which time that man or woman would have to worry about what was going on. “The priest shall isolate him for seven more days” so two weeks in total

“and the priest will then look at him again and if the infection had faded, he would be pronounced clean. It’s just a rash or something Eczema or something. But if the rash spreads further, then he will appear again and he priest will print out some unclean. It’s leprosy.”

It’s like the C word, isn’t it? Today, it’s Cancer.

Sometimes it’s already extremely clear what he’s got, he meets the priest, and it’s all over him, and so therefore, if the infection is from his head to his feet, the priest will look and behold, it’s *obvious* it’s Leprosy and he’s *covered* with it and he will pronounce him ‘unclean.’ But there were two types therefore, there was this white leprosy, which was get better after three years, and he was pronounced clean, even if it was sort of all over him. There was another type that was just obviously terrible, and that was a serious type, those were the tests that were given. And again, there’s nothing to tell us what these people went through. If that man were to, or a woman would have a red forehead or rash there than he had to tear his clothes. The hair of his head would be uncovered. He would cover his mouth and cry before himself unclean, unclean! And if he loved others, he would shout it loudly. Leprosy is breathed-in, and as leprosy is breathed-in from one victim to another, and that’s how it’s spread, so they would have to breathe out these curses against themselves. It’s also bred by touching the unclean thing, so there would be a suspicion on that person that they haven’t been following, (perhaps correct, the suspicion might be true )that they hadn’t been following the law of Moses.

## A Terrifyingly Awful Disease

It's to note that in the Middle Ages, when leprosy was rife, and there were thousands of leprosy hospitals, six alone in Chichester, that it was probably due to the squirrel fur trade, an unclean animal under the Law of Moses, (and they found that out by DNA testing or DNA analysis of the Leprosy bacterium from the Max Planck Institute.) So it's just an aside that the Law of Moses could well protect you from the transmission of leprosy, so then he spent the rest of his life going around with his face covered, there was no long-term hope for that person. It was a pronouncement, essentially, of the death, of slow death, it's a very slow growing bacteria.

And it's awful, just the most dreadful thing you can imagine. In the Bible days, no physician could treat it, it was uncontrolled therefore, and just took its course, apart from all the physical symptoms, which were just dreadful, all the patchiness and the bulbousness, and we'll go into some of those details, it attacks the nervous system, and you and you begin to lose sensation in every limb, every part of you. So you become *deadened* to the world. You can't feel your limbs, and so you knock them, you scratch yourself and you cut yourself without realising it, or you have a sort an OCD itch perhaps, and instead of realising that it's hurting you, you just carry on and draw blood and and it doesn't heal in the normal way. Instead, the infection travels around in your blood, reaching every part of you. You bash your feet on stones.

People who have leprosy today report that their fingers are eaten by rats in the night, they don't know, that's how terrible this is. Your bones are deformed, they become claws. Your feet... you can't walk. Your bones are absorbed into your hands until their stumps. Your nose is absorbed, if you're lucky enough for that not to happen, your teeth will fall out. Your face is completely exploded until you have flaps of skin and it looks like you've been under gravity or something, it looks just as if you're drawn out. It's the most... and I do, because of the message of this healing parable, I do ask you to look online some pictures and just get a feeling for what this man looked like, perhaps, as he met Jesus on what people had to go through and therefore what it means to us to see, to actually visibly be able to see these people which we don't see today, it's an object lesson for us, as we will find out so the leprosy further attacks the bone marrow.... There's just nothing that this disease leaves untouched, and it's a slow, oozing death, as I say, atrophying fingers, it attacks the eyes, it brings blindness, you know, in the worst possible way, the eyes look like they're just falling out. Sterility occurs. The one thing it isn't, though it's very painful, because your limbs are dead. It's just ugly, it gets into your organs, and eventually you lose everything.

This is the reality for that man. That was his outlook. His voice may have been changed. You could certainly smell him coming. There was nothing about him which was not *distasteful*, *repugnant*, *repellent*. He was shunned, that man, as he walked towards Jesus, the crowds would have parted like the waters in the Red Sea. But the one thing that may not have been affected was his mind.

### **The Walking Dead**

But as the historian Josephus writes, these lepers were considered dead people. They were, quite literally, the walking dead.

So this was no doubt, this was a terrifying, awful disease. But it's not just that it was ugly beyond imagination, and all of this, it made you ceremonially unclean, it destroyed your relationships with others and your relationship with God. You could no longer worship together, you could no longer visit your family or be part of the community. This is the most graphic, and that's why I suggest you look at what what these people suffer, illustration of what sin is. I would like to suggest that *sin* is this ugly, this incurable, this uncontrolled in us, unless we change, contaminating and alienating and all of those things that we've just heard, it leaves you with stigma, if others can recognise the sin in you, and it's certainly how we must appear to God, naturally speaking, we're ceremonially unclean, we're just a walking illustration of the fall, and unless we do something about it, those characteristics remain in us.

### **A Surprising Jesus**

So it's totally surprising. Is it not? And shocking, that Jesus, in presenting himself as a clean sinless son of God, begins with such a man? You don't go near a leper and a leper doesn't go near you. It was utterly beyond the realms of any social norm, Old Testament Law, it was just not done. You could hear these people coming, remember? So there was no chance you could accidentally bump into one. This is an outstanding thing that Jesus did and what makes it more outstanding is the attitude of the leper. This leper approached and bowed low before him, saying,

“Lord, if you're willing, you can make me clean”

### **His Attitude - Confidence.**

The first thing that makes this leper so interesting is that he came with confidence absolutely and utterly against the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses to him meant something, didn't it? It wasn't (just) a set of ceremonial laws to obey. Here was the son of God and I can go to him with confidence.

“and behold, there came a leper”,

it says, a leper approached, he didn't touch Jesus from behind, silently, he comes right up, and the crowd parts and he's there. This man was so desperate. Do we feel that desperate? Did we feel that desperate before we were baptised? You know, we recognise in that man something of ourselves, don't we? The fact that he was an outcast did not stop him. He came in full view of everybody out of a very deep need, to speak to Jesus.

### **His Attitude - Humility.**

The second characteristic as he came with humility, he bowed low before Jesus. He fell on his knees, as we hear in another gospel. He came worshipping him, didn't he? When he said 'Lord', it wasn't just a title to him, he knew he was in the presence of God's representative. He fell prostrate, and Jesus standing there in front of him. That been many healings, of course, but one wonders how he heard of this, this Jesus, from where he was outside the camp, in a leper colony probably. Nonetheless, he comes before Jesus and prostrate himself

in humble worship. It's clear to see that whatever his body may have been going through, his mind was still pure in that sense, he could recognise Jesus.

### **His Attitude - Faith.**

The third thing that we read is that he, or that I feel is important, is he comes with great faith. He was full of leprosy as well wasn't he but also full of faith. Luke, the physician says, 'Full of leprosy', you could do it, he thinks, therefore, the only question is, 'do you want to,' he had nothing to lose? And I like to think that the reason why he came in faith is that just a few moments before, a few days earlier or perhaps weeks, Jesus was giving a talk in the synagogue, everybody's eyes were fastened on him and he made the point that 'there were many lepers in Israel, but only Naaman the Syrian was healed', and that crowd turned on him, from hearing gracious words, 'isn't this the son of Joseph, where are all these gracious words?', the crowd rounded on him and took him to the edge of the cliff and wanted to kill him, that would have been big news, but he passed through them, we hear, so the big news of Jesus, and attached to the fact that he was making an example of a leper that was *not* in Israelite, I like to think, would have given this man courage, *outside the camp*, not allowed to take part in any of the ceremonies but Naaman was healed. Maybe I could be too?

### **'If You Will'**

If you will. How many times have we prayed that brothers and sisters, we know he can, but will he? A very difficult thing to say. And here we have the answer, don't we? Some people like to say that Jesus may have been indignant at the question. I'm not sure, it says he was moved with compassion. We *believe* God is able even, if we have a disease that won't leave us. We know he's able, but maybe there's a reason. Maybe there was a reason this man had such terrible leprosy. And of course, we know there was, so that from the rest of time, God's purpose on Earth here we know that God's name is great, just like the paralytic there's a reason why people suffer and there's a reason why we suffer. We know he can, but will he? So he had confidence, had a deep need, he came with *reverence* and *humility*, with *faith*,

“and Jesus, put forth his hand and touched him”

Given everything we've just heard about the disease of leprosy, that's unbelievable. He put forward his hand and touched him. You don't touch people with leprosy you're never permitted to. But you know, that was probably what that man needed of all things, a *relationship*, personal contact, and Jesus simply says, be clean. As I say. It's one of the great things about the Bible, that it just glosses over so much detail. 'It is my will, be clean', and his miracle was immediate.

### **Jesus Touches the Unclean Thing**

When we touch the unclean thing, we become unclean. When Jesus touches the unclean thing, they become clean.

That's power and its power we can't imagine his claws becoming beautiful hands, his eyes clarifying, his hair growing back, his eyelashes, his scaly skin disappearing, his voice restored.

Everything that we've ever experienced in life would fade into insignificance in the presence of that miracle. Everything we know about technology, the fact that sixteen million lepers are cured as it were today by drugs is as nothing because they still have all those terrible symptoms. This man was made whole.

“See thou tell no man, don't say a word to anyone but go and show yourself to the priest and offer a sacrifice that Moses commanded”

And people mention this and they say, well maybe Jesus didn't want the attention. He didn't want to get the crowd's going, and so he asked this man to keep its secret, but Jesus needed to fulfil all righteousness, the man needed to obey the law of Moses. Jesus was thinking of him I think. that man needed to rejoin society but had ostracised him. And to do that, he had to go to the priests without them realising that it was Jesus. This Jesus they had just tried to kill, without them realising it was Jesus who had healed him. And they needed to inspect him, perhaps for a week or two and then pronounce *clean* and they would have been then complicit in this miracle. They would have looked back and they would have..., he would have had a certificate, he would have been able to prove that he was clean and that *they* had said so, and then when he said that Jesus had done it, it would have made all the difference. We're reminded of the Syro-Phoenician woman who Jesus was silent towards, she stood outside until she was bursting with faith and came in and prostrated herself and begged him. We would imagine that this man if he had been able to go away in silence and just carry out Jesus command, would have had a similar conversion experience from being someone who had come confidently but not quite making the last few metres, to somebody he was bursting with energy for the rest of his life. Rather like pool had to go through that 'death' period of persecuting the church. You know, we we heard earlier some sad news, and we know that what we saw him weakness, we reap in power.

So as we say, this leper who once stood a far off, unclean, cursed, cursed by his *own* mouth is now made near, and he can approach with confidence that graceful man. The healing miracle therefore, was not of his healing, but was of Christ's sacrifice. Christ sacrifice is what makes all of this possible, because in metaphor, this man represented scene and we take part in that ugliness that's lying just below the surface of our skin. And it's only through Jesus' sacrifice, a man who was prepared to walk towards his *own* terrible death that we have any chance at all. I'm reminded of.. I'll tell you a story, when I was in a lecture at Brighton, one of my friends was sitting at the back with me and I drew a cartoon of me being crushed by a one tonne weight of sin and my friend wrote back to me. “Well, what you going to do about it?” And hyou know, I was quite shocked by that. I thought, Well, I don't know if I can do anything about it. I'll try. But it's not really *my* job. It's Christ job. He's now no longer meeting with us. The second request I have for you is that you pray for him tonight as well.

### **Jesus Makes Everything Meaningful**

The sacrifice of Jesus, therefore, is what makes all of this meaningful. It's what makes our suffering meaningful. It's what makes those who have passed away meaningful. What gives us hope for the future. It's what made this man's faith meaningful, it's what made all of the

lives of the past meaningful. Even at this late stage, those Jewish leaders that we feel may have tried to kill this man for having been healed, like they did Lazarus, even at that late stage, were even able to accept Jesus. And we are, too. Just think for a moment therefore, about the sin that's in you that's *still* in you, that you haven't transformed but is still holding you back.

“ ‘Even now’ ”, declares the Lord “ ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ ”

Renew your hearts,

rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.”

There are three reactions to Jesus' presence aren't there. There's Peter's mother-in-law, who was immediately about humble, obedient service. There is the disobedience of the happy ebullience of the healed leper, and then there's the hostility and rejection that we sometimes see in those who've fallen away from the truth, and those, sadly, those Pharisees that could see him in the flesh and still not understand who he was. And we're probably a mix of all three of them aren't we. If it weren't for Christ sacrifice this would be a sad state of affairs, we would of all men be sad. But isn't it enough? Just think of the blessings that we have. Isn't it enough then that Jesus has done all of this for us?

### All That God Has Done For Us

I mean, we have life given to us without our will, and then were given agency over our life, then we're given knowledge so that we can understand our position, the very stars themselves, lead us towards God. Yahweh's literally written in stone specific knowledge of him, how to love him, and Jesus, the tree of life from which we may freely eat has come and sacrificed himself for us. God has caused angels and righteous men and women to call out to us through the scriptures, through the ages. They called out like Joseph had a man calling out in front of him, This Yahshua is clean. This man that's coming. He's clean, *clean*, clean, even a voice from the sky proclaims him.. someone who pleased God. We know who to follow, we know to come to. we know whose door to knock at. We already know the answer ahead of time to every question, no matter how personal, no matter how tragic, no matter our suffering.

The feet of Jesus are nearby heard again. This is why we at this moment, have such gratitude for Jesus long-suffering patience. Is it a small thing that we can come so confidently? We can come with so much faith, so much belief that not only *will* he but that he *wants* to? We have an amazing hope don't we. And what we're about to do now is itself a beautiful thing, such a simple, understated thing.

You know, when you think of your sin, I think a lot of people, well, in the world perhaps, they think of a book or scroll that's open, and there will be two columns, and on the left and on the right, and on the left will be all the things you did wrong, and on the right. But instead, I think that book will be a story of your life, a story of your progression from

before you knew anything and God foreknew us and was knitting us together, to when we recognise that state of sin in us, when we were baptised and yes, sometimes disobedient and yes, sometimes rejection and yes, sometimes humble service, but also a growing recognition, like the disciples of the character and identity of this man we've chosen to follow and a growing trust and coming-togetherness of ourselves with Jesus.

This is why we sacrifice so much time, money and energy. It's why we cut off the parts of us that we want to let go of. It's why we deaden ourselves to sin. We allow the Spirit to take over and we don't mind the passing, of that which was us, as we allow ourselves, our earthly man, to shrivel away and drop off.

This lord, that we follow, the Lord that we fall at the feet of, is willing to receive us as we are, repulsive and unclean in many ways. But he is someone that as he touches our hearts, cleans our consciences and transforms us, someone willing to stand up for us. *This* is why we remember him as often as we think of him, and at least once each week.

We won't know how many people in this world have been made alive and healed by him until the kingdom, the marriage supper of the Lamb, when two will become one flesh, as we share this bread and wine together let's not just think of it as sustaining our memory, but also of looking ahead to what he's made possible

“for God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on Earth or things in Heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.”

So let's restore our spiritual focus and strength of purpose as we realise that Jesus *is willing* and he's willing to touch our hearts, he wants to become one flesh with us, because when that happens, when he becomes one flesh with us, you and me, the body of his Bride will be united with his body, and we will be in relationship with God Almighty in *clean, whole, permanent, oneness*.

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