

February 15, 2009
6th Sunday after Epiphany

Christ Has Mercy on All People

Pastor Michael Ewart
Text: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Part of our sinful nature is that we tend to be prejudiced. We all have our own preconceived – and often wrong – ideas about people of different nationalities, people of different skin color, people with certain diseases, etc. Very often it's hard for us to see beyond our prejudices and preconceptions. In fact, prejudice is so much a part of us, that we naturally think of God as being the same way. Surely, God must show favoritism! Surely, he must show more mercy on some types of people than on others. Today let us remember and rejoice that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Savior of **all** nations and all people. He doesn't play "favorites." **He has mercy on all people.** We read Mark 1:40-45:

" A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere."

Leprosy was a terrible disease in ancient times. Today we know there are two types of leprosy. One is more severe and usually results in slow, painful death if not treated. The other type is healed even with no treatment in 1 – 3 years. Leprosy starts with discoloration of a patch of skin, often on the face. The area affected is immune to pain. In fact, damage is often done to the tissue because of the lack of feeling. The skin in the affected areas swells and deteriorates. Those affected become greatly disfigured if the disease progresses unchecked. With time the afflicted lose their ears, nose, hands, and other extremities. But just as bad as the disease itself was the isolation required in Old Testament laws. Leprosy is contagious, and those who had it were cast out of society and greatly feared. The person with leprosy not only suffered a very slow and painful death, but he also was shunned by society and separated from all of his family and friends. Although modern medicines almost always cure leprosy, in ancient times, there was no cure. The leper had little hope of returning to a normal life.

With this picture, you now have a better idea of what the leper in today's text was facing. Yet this leper **did** have hope. He turned to Jesus for help. Our text says, "*A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."*" By the way he asked, we see that this leper had a good understanding of his own condition, and of his own position before God. He was a leprous sinner who didn't deserve to stand before God's Son. Therefore he was humble. He fell on his knees before Jesus. He demanded nothing. But he did make a humble request. He simply said, "*If you are willing, you can make me clean.*"

Clearly, this man trusted that Christ had the power to heal him. So many times people pray without faith. In their heart they say, "God, if you exist, if you can hear me, if you care, if

you are able... help me.” But this man knew for certain that Jesus had all power. And he knew for certain that Jesus was able to use that power to cleanse him. He **did** say, “*If you are willing.*” However, this wasn’t a lack of faith on his part. He did not know what Jesus’ will was in this case. He knew that he could not demand that Jesus use his power to heal him. All he could do was request.

[*Humility*]. This man with leprosy teaches much about the proper way to pray. We must approach our Savior fully knowing our own condition. We may not have a physical disease, but we all have a spiritual disease – sin. Like leprosy, sin has infected us. It is growing and spreading. We are deteriorating and dying. This disease is repulsive to God, and he must separate himself from all sinners. Eventually, sin results in eternal separation from God in a place called hell. We cannot cure ourselves of this disease, and eternal damnation is inevitable. Unless we fully realize our condition, we will not approach Christ Jesus in the same way that leper did. We must be humble and know that Jesus doesn’t owe us anything.

[*Faith*.] But the leper also teaches us that we must approach Jesus with faith... faith that he both loves us and has power to help us. If we doubt God’s love, we wonder if he really cares enough to do something about our condition. If we doubt his power, we wonder if he really has the power to help us in our condition. Either way, our unbelief is an insult to God. Such prayer is not heard. God could justly say to such a person, “If you don’t think I have the power to help you, why are you asking?! If you aren’t convinced I care, why not appeal to someone you know does?” Let today’s text put to rest our doubts. Christ has both the power and the love to help us.

Let’s look at the next part of our text. Christ shows us that despite our deplorable condition, we receive his mercy because of who he is (not because of who we are.) *‘Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”* Certainly the miracle is amazing, but just as amazing is the fact that Jesus was moved to help because he was *“filled with compassion.”* Perhaps we sometimes think of God as distant and detached from this world. Some even think of him as an emotionless, stern judge. But here we see that our Lord Jesus was moved to compassion. By the way, this is the same word that describes how the Good Samaritan felt when he saw the man who was robbed, beaten and left for dead. He had compassion on him. When God sees our sinful state, and the suffering and judgment we have brought upon ourselves because of it, he doesn’t blow up and strike us dead. Neither does he laugh and say, “You’re getting what you deserve!” Instead he has compassion for us... compassion which moves him to do something!

What did Jesus do? Jesus laid his hand upon the man, and healed him. Jesus could have healed the man from a distance. Remember the centurion whose servant was sick? Jesus never even went to his house. He simply said the word, and that servant was healed. But in this case, Jesus touched the man with leprosy. Think about that. If you visited someone in the hospital with a highly contagious and terminal skin disease, would you touch them? Jesus did. Why? Not because healing could only take place by physical contact. But because Jesus was demonstrating his desire to be close to a man who society avoided. Our Lord Jesus Christ touched the untouchable!

And when Jesus healed him, the healing was instantaneous and complete. There was no lengthy recovery. Jesus said the word, and he was better. There is no limit to Jesus’ power. Just as there is no limit to Jesus’ compassion.

Because of our sin and rebellion, we have isolated ourselves from God. But because God desired to draw us close to himself, he sent his Son Jesus Christ to remove the guilt of our sin.

Jesus came and lived among us... the holy one among sinners. But removing sin is very different from healing leprosy. He did more than brush shoulders with sinners. Christ actually took the guilt of our sin upon himself. 2 Corinthians 5:21 describes it best: *God made him who had no sin (Jesus) to be sin for us.* He who had no sin didn't simply live among sinners. Didn't simply associate with them and eat with them. He became one of them... not be himself sinning buy by actually removing our diseased and decaying sinfulness and becoming it for us.

He became cursed so we could be blessed. He was punished so we could be set free. Christ didn't owe us anything. And he didn't redeem us because he was forced to. Just as he told the leper, *"I am willing"*, and cleansed him, he also said to the Father and to us, *"I am willing"*. He went the way of the cross, and cleansed us of our sin. What compassion and love our Savior has for us! What power he has to take away our guilt! How blessed we are to have been "touched" and healed by the Lord Jesus Christ!

When one has been healed by Christ, there will naturally be the desire to tell others of his mercy, and to treat others with similar love. But our text teaches us that our response to Christ's love must be directed by Christ. The man received very specific directions, *Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."* This sounds strange to us. Why didn't Jesus want the man to tell others? There are several good reasons. 1) Throughout Jesus' ministry he progressively revealed who he was and the salvation he was accomplishing. He didn't immediately reveal everything about himself. 2) Jesus' main goal was to preach about salvation. He needed to reveal God's way of forgiveness and life to the people. There were already big crowds following Jesus, and he knew if even more came, he wouldn't be able to effectively teach and preach. 3) Many people already misunderstood who he was. If more stories about his miraculous healings were spread, more would come to him for earthly well-being instead of eternal blessings. So Jesus wanted this healing to be kept quiet.

Jesus wanted the man to go and show himself to the priest. In doing so he was to follow the Old Testament ritual for being restored to society. Only the priest could declare a man healed, clean and fit to return to family and friends. Jesus desired him to do this because God's Law required it. Jesus didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus also wanted him to go *"as a testimony to them"*. Many priests were among those who rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah. If these priests declared the man free of leprosy, then they would be hypocrites to deny the one who cleansed him. The man's healing was a "testimony" that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah.

But the man didn't obey Jesus. He was so excited about his healing that he went and told everyone what Jesus had done. It's hard to blame the man. It's hard to keep quiet when we have good news. But because he didn't do what Jesus said, such huge crowds of people came to Jesus that he couldn't appear in populated areas anymore. He had to withdraw for a time to the country. The man meant well, but when he acted as he saw fit instead of as Jesus commanded, he hindered God's plans instead of helping them.

From the reaction of this man to Jesus' healing, we learn two important truths. First of all, when a person knows Christ's mercy and has experienced his forgiveness, he will naturally want to live it and proclaim it. You know the secret to eternal life. You know how to receive God's favor. You know how to have peace with God. Isn't this something you want to share with others? Jesus' command to "not tell anyone" was for that man at that time. To us he has

commanded, *“Go and teach all nations!”* Will we be like that man... unable to keep quiet about the amazing grace God has demonstrated to us sinners? When you know the sinner you are, and when you know the grace God has given, sharing this good news is only natural!

The second thing we learn from this man is that serving God must be done in God’s way, not our way. In His Word, God tells us how to live, how to act, how to think, what to say. God clearly reveals what is pleasing to him and what is not. When we know his grace, won’t we also want to know specifically how we can please him? Many well-intentioned Christians have done lots of damage to God’s Kingdom when they invented ways to serve God which were actually contrary to his will. The Crusaders of the Middle Ages would be such an example. To this day, many atheists point to the Crusades as evidence that all religions produce intolerance and violence. The Crusaders were well-intentioned, but they failed to act according to God’s will. They failed to read the 5th Commandment, “Do not kill.” They ignored Jesus’ warning that whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword. They chose to ignore his declaration, “My Kingdom is not of this world.”

Bible study is crucial for our walk with God. Only by a life time of study of Scripture do we understand our own sinful state. Only through repeated reading do we understand and believe what Jesus did for us when he died and rose again. Only by carefully searching Scripture do we understand how we can properly lead lives which glorify and honor God.

Dear brothers and sisters, be aware of how Satan will attack you. When it comes to receiving God’s love and being blessed by his power, Satan will attack you in one of two ways. He will either convince you that you cannot possibly receive God’s salvation because you are too bad and undeserving. Or he will convince you that you are so good and deserving that God owes it to you to save you. Watch out for both extremes. Remember and rejoice that our Savior has mercy on all people! No one deserves his love and favor, so we all alike must plead to him for mercy. And the same Savior who touched and healed a contagious, diseased leper, also comes to us, draws us close, and declares us forgiven and cleansed by his holy, precious blood. In the joy and peace of his forgiveness, let us serve the Lord, paying careful attention to the type of life and service which he teaches in his Word. And let us boldly proclaim the compassion and the power of our God to others! Amen.

"Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD or fully declare his praise? Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right." (Psalm 106:1-3, NIV)

"Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise." (Psalm 106:47, NIV)

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the LORD." (Psalm 106:48, NIV)