

**And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.**

**(Mark 1:40–45)**

## Introduction

The great hymn, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, serves as an important reminder of God’s love for his people. It serves as a great encouragement for us to pray to the one who is merciful. In fact, as we will learn below, he is so full of loving mercy that he *indignantly* deals with that which harms us.

The passage before us points to what I call God’s *merciful indignation*. We see this in Jesus’ interaction with a man who was a leper. Mercy is writ large in this passage, but if you listen carefully, you will also hear a tone — one that is as sobering as the scene is encouraging. As we read these six verses, we should be listening for what this man heard: *indignation*. The sound of the Lord’s angry sigh is all over this passage. Thank God for this, for his indignant mercy is at the root of his gospel.

Anger can be a good and constructive thing. The scriptures exhort us to “be angry and do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26). Clearly, anger is not always wrong. It is sometimes, in fact, very righteous. “Righteous indignation” is a biblical concept. Though that exact phrase is not found in scripture, its idea is expressed some 36 times. Adjectives accompanying “indignation” such as “burning,” “fiery,” “weapons of” and “great” highlight God’s response to sin and to sinners. It speaks of God’s righteous wrath against man’s rebellion. When we read about God’s anger, we are reading about something good, something that is holy. God is indignant against our sin, for a couple of reasons, but one reason is because he is merciful and loving to sinners.

God’s wrath against sin *is* at the heart of the gospel. He is committed to destroying that which is destroying us. John put it this way, “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God

appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). In these verses, Jesus was doing just that.

## A Sufferer, Hopeful for Change

As this section opens, we read of a sufferer hopeful for change: “And a leper came to him, imploring, and kneeling said to him, ‘If you will, you can make me clean’” (v. 40).

We don’t know how much time had elapsed between the Lord praying in the wilderness (1:35–39) and the scene before us. We do know that Jesus had commenced a wider Galilean ministry, one that would ascend in popularity until its apex was met with hostility. It appears that Mark is preparing us for this.

The scene before us is both pathetic and hopeful. It is meant to be instructive.

As Jesus entered an unnamed town in Galilee, he was met by a man who was desperate for what he believed Jesus can do. The man was suffering. And he was desperate for what he perhaps thought Jesus *came* to do. He was only partly right.

The text identifies him as “a leper.” He rushed to Jesus, knelt and, literally, begged him to cleanse him. There is much here that deserves examination – and, I trust, application.

## A Leper

This sounds pejorative, and, in those days, it was.

Leprosy was a catch-all term for various skin conditions. Rabbis listed seventy-two of them. Some believe that what is today called Hansen’s Disease (the disfiguring malady that we associate with leprosy) was included in this. Regardless, leprosy was a serious condition in ancient days, as it is today.

Leprosy was not a *sinful* condition, but it was a *consequence* of living in a sinful and sin-cursed world. To have leprosy was to suffer. Suffering is one of sin’s horrific consequences. Suffering is Satan’s goal.

God addressed this condition of uncleanness in Leviticus 13–14. There, we read how the priests were to discern whether a skin condition was leprous or not. If the ailment in the skin was infectious, then the person was identified as a leper and was to self-identify his condition by putting his hand over his mouth (like covering your mouth when you sneeze or cough) and declaring, “Unclean!” The purpose was not to shame the person, but rather to hygienically protect the community. But obviously, shame was a collateral consequence. That’s worth contemplating.

The leper therefore suffered both physically and socially, for he was essentially ostracised from the community. The community of God's people lived life in close proximity to each another. Therefore, the condition of one member of the congregation potentially affected the condition of others in the congregation.

One morning, a man or woman might wake up to notice a reddish spot. As he or she examines it, infection seems to be on the skin. It may be nothing to worry about but, a couple of days later, it is still there – and it appears to be getting worse. The faithful covenant-keeper would call for a priest to come and give his dermatological opinion. This was risky. If the priest determined that it was leprosy, the individual would face exile from his family, friends, fellow worshippers, and the wider community. If he or she was employed, he or she would not be for long. But covenantal faithfulness demands honesty about the condition. Church member, how clean are you? How clean are *we*?

If the priest confirmed that the individual *did* have a contagious skin condition, sanctions were placed upon him or her. But thankfully, leprosy *could* be cleansed. The condition *could* be reversed. The infected skin *could* become once again like that of a baby – fresh, whole, healthy.

When this happened, the priest would again be summoned. If a clean bill of health appeared to be in order, then the individual was to offer two birds as a sacrifice (one killed and the other dipped in blood and set free – a picture of substitutionary atonement). Another eight days would pass, and a final inspection would take place. If all was well, three lambs were offered: one as a sin offering, one as a guilt offering, and the third as a burnt offering. These were accompanied by a grain offering. Leprosy was a sobering condition; its cleansing was costly. And when the leprosy was cleansed, there was to be great gratitude expressed in sacrificial devotion to the God who cleanses and cures and restores (Romans 12:1–2).

It should be noted that, in the various Gospel accounts of lepers, *cleansing*, not *healing*, is the assigned terminology. This speaks of the need for a complete catharsis (the term in the Greek for “cleanse”) of the person. Let me explain.

Compare the situation with Peter's mother-in-law. There was no problem with her having contact with others, including those from outside her immediate family. The same is true of those who came to Peter's home to be healed or delivered from demons. But leprosy was an entirely different category. I can't explain all of that, but leprosy seemed to have been the ultimate example of the need for God's intervention.

If someone had a headache, they could take two aspirins and pray. With leprosy, aspirin would not help. Even a dermatologist would be of no assistance. *God*, and God alone, could cleanse the leper. With leprosy, the cleansing (“healing”) required both a ritual – a sacrificial

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one—and God’s immediate intervention. *There was no other cure* (see Numbers 12:10–15; 2 Kings 5:1–7).

With this information, let’s return to the scene before us. This man was hopeless apart from God. Enter Jesus. Enter hope—such hope that the leper broke the social norm. He approached Jesus, rather than avoiding him in accordance with Levitical law. He may even have touched him as he fell to his knees, “imploring” him to cleanse him.

Those in desperate need often resort to risky and desperate means. What do they have to lose? In fact, they have everything to gain (cf. 2 Kings 5:8–14).

My friend, you can try to get cleaned up before the Lord on your own, following your *own* agenda. Like Naaman, you can get angry at the messenger, even to the point of trying to silence him or her. But, like Naaman, you will *still* be a *leper*. He stormed off mad, but he remained in a miserable, maddening condition.

But as we will see, it is when we have no human crutch to lean on that we are in the supreme condition for sovereign grace. This brings us to the next observation.

### Willing and Able

This leper would not be one for much longer. But at this point, he didn’t know this. What he did know is that Jesus was “able.” However, he was not sure if Jesus was *willing*. This is how most of us, who feel like lepers, view the Lord. We know that Jesus is *able* to transform us; the question we wrestle with is, *will he?* As someone has said, “It is easier to believe in God’s power than in his mercy.” However, we should consider that God’s mercy is emphasised in the Bible far more than is his power.

We, of course, have no way of knowing how illuminated this man was about the full identity of Jesus. We don’t know whether he realised that Jesus was the Son of God (though I very strongly suspect he did *not*). We don’t know how he knew about the amazing authority of Jesus. What we *do* know is that he had faith that Jesus could cleanse him. He clearly understood that Jesus had the ability to transform his life.

By the way, you don’t need a whole lot of knowledge about Jesus if you will be saved from your sins. You *do* need to know that you are a sinner and he is the Saviour.

Perhaps he had heard of those in Capernaum whom Jesus had exorcised, and others whom he had healed. But whatever his source of information, he came to Jesus with the confidence that Jesus was able—if he was willing.

He did not demand but desired. He did not insist but implored. He did not bargain but begged. This man understood something about the authority of Jesus that drove him to him, and that drove him to his knees. We need to learn from this.

Dear reader, get on your knees and ask him to cleanse you from anger, from pornographic addiction, from a critical spirit, from self-centredness in relationships, from defensiveness, or whatever else it is that has cut you off from God and others.

Salvation is by the sovereign grace of God. We can be cleansed, but only if we submit to him. If we come to him demanding, we will be dismissed. Arrogant demands indicate that we want to be in *control* more than we want to be *cleansed*.

Our *posture* will determine whether Jesus will be our *Pastor* (see John 21:15–17; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4). Our will must be submissive to his will. The good news is that he is not willing that any of his should perish but that all will come to repentance. So, like this leper, take Jesus at his *will* – at his *word*. Believe that those whom the Father gives to the Son will come to him, and he will not cast them out (John 6:37). Believe that God loved the world in this way: that he gave his only Son so that those who believe in him will not perish but enjoy everlasting life (John 3:16). Believe that everyone who calls in the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13).

Friend, Jesus is willing to cleanse the willing. He is willing to save the lost and is willing to save the *found* (Matthew 1:21). How willing are *you*? What are *you* willing to let go of? How desperate are *you*? What social and/or relational and/or financial risks are *you* willing to take? Get on your knees and you will find just how willing and able Jesus is!

### Compassionate, Constructive Indignation

Jesus responds to the man's passionate and humble plea for cleansing by doing what the man desired. He was willing, indeed! "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean" (Mark 1:41–42).

Jesus cleansed the man *instantly* and *immediately*, in the fullness of that word. That is, nothing *mediated* the cleansing; Jesus did it all. Further, this passage points to the accompanying truth that Jesus *paid it all*. Let me explain.

There is much debate among commentators about the words in v. 41 "moved with pity." The major discussion surrounds a textual variant. Some Greek texts read, "moved with indignation." Which reading is correct?

The variant reading is *orgithas*, which means to be moved with anger. That seems very different than “moved with pity.”

The word translated “pity” literally means “to have the bowels yearn,” and hence is translated along the lines of feeling sympathy. It is found twelve times in the New Testament – four times in Mark (v. 41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22).

Jesus, being God, *is* compassionate (Psalm 78:38; 145:8; Lamentations 3:22). His gut was moved with the pain and brokenness he encountered in the world – as here. When Jesus saw the effects of a sin-broken world, he was *moved*.

Had there been no fall in the garden, there would be no sickness or sadness in the world, the larger garden of God. But sin came and so did the miseries of broken relationships (with God, with one another), broken wills (choosing sin over the Sovereign), and broken bodies. *And this disturbed Jesus*. He was moved to do something about it. For these reasons I believe the argument can be made for the original text referring to “*moved to anger*” – “anger at the evil which spoils human nature in any shape or form’ (English).

Ultimately, Jesus is angry at Satan who has brought such destruction into this world through sin. As someone has indicated, what we have here in this passage is another episode of the conflict between Christ and the devil (Wessel). And Jesus is indignant against him. That’s good news, for repentant sinners.

### Hesitancy about Wrath

In the parallel accounts of this story, there is no mention of pity or compassion. This may indicate that it should not appear here either. But why, then, so many manuscripts with this reading? Because Jesus being angry and Jesus cleansing do not seem to go hand in hand – until you think about it. Jesus cleansed the temple in anger. He was indignant when he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:33, 38).

At some point, a scribe may have chosen the softer reading (pity instead of indignation) because it seems more congruous with Jesus’ compassionate act (and it was compassionate!). But I would argue that this act of pity was also an act of passion. It foreshadowed the greater passion (8:31; 9:12) by which Jesus would secure cleansing for all who come to him to be made right with God. And what is the cross but a place where both God’s pity and anger came together?

In this narrative we see Jesus, the Son of God, responding with anger to renew a man. He cleanses a man in conjunction with righteous indignation – “as though the leprosy were dispelled by holy wrath” (Edwards). Wrath and mercy meet in Jesus. His bowels yearned

for something corrupted to be put right. Jesus was demonstrating the gospel he came to proclaim.

Yes, God is angry with the wicked every day. Yes, God hates sin. And yes, he therefore hates sinners. But this righteous anger was poured out on his Son as he hung on a cross on Calvary's hill. The cross of Christ clearly manifests the love of God, but it equally manifests God's hatred of sin. Thank God for his wrath! By God's righteously indignant intervention, we can be cleansed once for all – immediately and instantaneously – from the leprous guilt of our sin.

### Anger as Catharsis

We should learn from this scene that dealing with the consequences of a sinful world sometimes requires anger. At the least, we are not to face the realities of sin dispassionately. Righteous anger can be *cathartic*.

I don't mean that in a psycho-babble kind of way. Rather, as we see here, the righteous anger of Jesus at the wreckage that sin leaves in its wake is a natural response for those who have received the supernatural birth. To not be disturbed by the baggage of brokenness carried by sin is to be less than Christian. We are to love what God loves and hate what God hates. Just like Jesus.

This means confronting and correcting sinful behaviour in the life of our children. It means confronting and correcting sinful attitudes and actions in a fellow church member. It means confronting a sinful world with its manifold corruptions – being careful to not be self-righteous while looking for gospel opportunities. It means caring about the assaults on what Christ loves – his church.

### The Touch of Compassion

Assuming the correct rendering is indignation, compassion nevertheless remains present in this text. It is demonstrated when Jesus reached out his hand and touched the otherwise untouchable.

As we saw, the leper was considered to be contagious and therefore he was to warn people of his nearness. To be a leper was to be cut off from society. This was the norm. But Jesus was not normal. He stretched out his hand (emphasising his effort) and touched him. In doing so he ran the risk of infection. But love overcame fear. Compassion overcame comfort. Pity trumped protection. The desire to do good was so powerful that self-preservation took second place. Jesus' desire to cleanse was far stronger than his desire for safety. John Calvin wonderfully observes,

By his word alone he might have healed the *leper*; but he applied, at the same time, the touch of his hand, to express the feeling of compassion. Nor ought this to excite our wonder, since he chose to take upon him our flesh, that he might cleanse us from our sins. *The stretching out of his hand* was therefore an expression and token of infinite grace and goodness.

What a lesson for us all! If the King would touch an untouchable, why would we not do so? We who ourselves are lepers before a holy God. Sister, brother, reach out to a suffering world!

### Substitutionary Salvation

Jesus did not become leprous, even though he was subject to disease and sickness like every human being. But in this case apparently the angels took charge over him and pestilence was held at bay (see Psalm 93:10–11). But with the touch of Jesus something else took place. The leprosy was removed. I don't know where it went, but perhaps, like our transgressions, it was removed as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

In this scene, if we look closely, we see a hint of the reality of substitutionary atonement (see Leviticus 14) – that is, Jesus taking our sin, our leprosy in our place, that we might go away cleansed from sin and an evil conscience.

Jesus was willing to do this, and we know that because of the incarnation. We know that because of his selfless life on our behalf. We know that because he laid down his life for all those who will repent and believe on him for forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the wrath of God (Mark 10:45). And you can know that, if you will bow the knee of your will to him, imploring him to make you clean, he will wash your crimson sins till you stand before holy God, whiter than snow.

### Issuing a Command

In vv. 43–44, Jesus issued a command: “And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.’”

In these verses, we once again detect a tone of anger. The words “sternly charged” could be translated “to snort with anger” or “to have indignation.” It is almost as if Jesus was in a bad mood. But, of course, appearances can be deceiving.

As in the verses above, Jesus was disturbed in his spirit about the exceeding sinfulness of sin. This word appears in John 11:33, 38, where Jesus was confronted with the result of sin: death and decay – disorder brought into God's very good world of *order*.

But there is another sobering element here: Jesus “sent him away at once.” There was no time for celebration, no time for praise. No, this man must go, and he must go *now*. Why such a sobering command?

As in previous pericopes, Jesus was not interested primarily in miracle working. And it appears that he knows that this is precisely what would happen if this man did not get out of town, follow biblical precedent, go to the priests, offer his sacrifices giving testimony that he has been cleansed, and therefore be restored to normal religious and community life. In this, we see Jesus’ compassion as well.

But again, why the indignation? Because he knew what was in man (John 2:23). He knew the fickleness of fame. He knew the passing thrill of popularity. He knew the blindness of sinful man and how we only sense our felt needs rather than our greatest need, which is to be cleansed from sin and restored and reconciled to holy God. This grieved our Lord. It should grieve and warn us as well.

We should be grieved that people only want Jesus for what they can get from him. It should grieve us that people want from the church of Jesus what they can *get* rather than what they can *give*. This text should warn us of the danger of missing the point of Jesus: proclamation and crucifixion and justification and sanctification because of regeneration

### Soli Deo Gloria

Some argue that the phrase “for a proof to them” indicates that Jesus wanted to show that he obeyed the law. I don’t think so. If this man told the priests *how* and *who* healed him, the popularity and the crisis that he was trying to avoid wouldn’t be. No, rather, Jesus desired that all praise and glory go to God his Father. This command had everything to do with Jesus keeping his *focus*. Those who were blessed by him often didn’t, and they still don’t.

As we saw, the law demanded that a cleansed leper must go to the priests, bringing offerings to God out of gratitude for healing. God was to get the credit and therefore the glory for the cleansing. Jesus knew this. He came to earth for the glory of God (John 17). That is why the Father was well-pleased with him. This scene shows us, once again, that Jesus’ priority was to honour the Father in all that he both did and said. Jesus was committed to the Father’s purpose, not his own popularity. That is the reason for his serious and scriptural instruction to the ex-leper. To God be the glory, great things he has done.

In your ministry to others, give God the glory. When you experience victory, give God the glory. When you have been blessed, in any way, give God the glory.

## Avoiding a Crowd

For the sixth and the last time in this chapter the wilderness motif is present. The ex-leper disobeyed the Lord, and the Lord was therefore forced to the wilderness: “But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter” (v. 45).

Even here, in exile, Jesus continued to be swamped by the crowds. Perhaps the Lord had some prescience about the disobedience of this man, and this motivated his sobering and indignant charge to tell nobody. Let’s make a couple of important observations.

First, as previously, the crowds made Jesus famous, but he desired their faith. They didn’t love him, they simply *lusted* for what he could give them. The crowds, all too often like us, were merely self-indulgent rather than serious and faithful disciples.

Jesus prioritised preaching the everlasting gospel, not temporal miracles. The crowds needed to hear and heed the gospel more than they needed the thrill of the sensational. Calvin comments so helpfully on this point, “The common people were so eager to demand miracles, that no room was left for doctrine. He wished that they would all be more attentive to the word than to signs.”

It should not go unmentioned that this man was disobedient to the Lord. We might empathise with his situation. It would be hard to keep such a thing a secret. But the disciple of Jesus is called to *obedience*.

Perhaps this man thought that the Lord was mistaken. “Certainly”, he may have thought, “the kingdom would advance much more quickly if word gets out.” If he thought this, he wouldn’t be the last person to do so. Too often we think that our pragmatics trump the principles of God’s word.

Hudson Taylor used to say, “God’s work done God’s way will never lack God’s supply.” God’s work must always be done God’s way, even when it seems to make little sense. Preaching is God’s means of transformation. The local church is God’s way to reach the world. Church discipline is a key to healthy church growth. Prayer is a major means to the global glory of God. God’s “house rules” are key to an ordered and healthy home and society.

Second, there is a beautiful redemptive picture here. Jesus touched one who had been banished outside the camp and now he was able to be within the camp of God’s people. But there was a cost. *Jesus* was now outside the camp. Again, the principle of substitution is pictured for us.

## Merciful Indignation

Mark 1:40–45

Doug Van Meter

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Jesus died on Golgotha's hill in the place of sinners who have seen and sensed their need. By God's grace, like this leper, we have been able to say our need: We are unclean sinners, polluted with sin to the core. But also, like him, we have submitted ourselves in our need. Jesus, we realise, is our only hope. And so, bowing our wills, we beg him for mercy. And he, moved with merciful indignation against that which had damned us, saves us from our sins.

This goes for after we are born again as well. He is able to touch our sinful stumblingblocks – anger, bitterness, self-centredness, sexual sin, unbelief, etc. – and remove them from us as far as the east is from the west. So, whatever else we might say about this passage, we can say, "Hallelujah, what a Saviour!" To God be the glory, great things he has done.

AMEN