More Than Skin-Deep:
Jesus heals the Man with leprosy
Luke 5:12-16

In case you didn't know, Su and I have four daughters. And sometimes we look at them and think, how on earth did two parents produce four children who are so different from us and from each other. Su and I are quiet and peace-loving. They are noise machines. One of them would love to wear pink frilly dresses, the others would die rather than be seen in pink. Three of them would climb anything, while one of them gets vertigo getting in the top bunk bed. Su and I despise shopping, the girls organize shopping trips for fun. And we think, are we really from the same family?

Well, if things can be so different within families, how much more different are we from people outside our families. Take me and Mark Bateman for example. One of us is tall, good looking, and an accomplished athlete. But in comparison the other one is none of those things, though he does have a bit more hair I have to admit.

And so you can look at some one else and think, man we are so different, we are just poles apart. And at first glance this man with leprosy lives in a different world from us, he is about as different from us as it is possible to be. But is he?

1. More than skin deep:
If you've got your Bible open you'll see from your footnote that the word leprosy covered a whole range of different skin conditions, and not just what we know today as leprosy. But what ever it was that this man had, he had it bad. Luke, and remember Luke was doctor, says in v12 he was 'full of leprosy'. So this wasn't a mild case. This wasn't a small area of rash on his arm that he could keep secret and covered with his sleeve. He was covered with it. It was as bad as it could be.

But this man's skin problem was only the outward, visible part of his problem. You see whilst leprosy has the power to destroy your nerve endings, and in the process destroys your fingers and toes and facial features in horrible, disfiguring ways, it destroyed far more than that for those who contracted it.

For reasons of public health and to try and keep the disease from spreading through a community, lepers were excluded from that community. They would be isolated and quarantined and made to live away from everyone else, outside the camp, or the town or the city. And if they approached anyone else and risked contaminating them, they were made to call out 'unclean, unclean'.

Imagine what that would have been like. Imagine the emotional and psychological impact of this isolation and ostracism. Imagine what it would do to you, to have to approach a crowd and as they hear you and see you coming you watch as they fell over themselves to avoid you. Imagine people staring at you, you are self-conscious enough of how your flesh is crumbling away, but imagine their stares; imagine mothers grabbing their children, pulling them to themselves and away from you, lest they touch you by accident.

Imagine the years of going without any physical contact. The heart wrenching longing for that which is closed to you. You can't embrace your wife, you can't

kiss your children. You're forced to spectate as your children grow up, from outside the town. Community and relationships and friendships are all closed down to you. And while people may have genuine sympathy for you, they also fear you, lest they catch it from you. And all the time the disease slowly eats away at your body just as it eats away at your soul. It's why one commentator calls leprosy 'a living death.'

And on top of all of this, imagine the thoughts you might have toward God: with a strange mingling of angry bitterness and crying pleas for mercy and healing and restoration.

Sure, leprosy destroys the skin, but it destroys far more than that. And here is a man, full of it.

Now, how different this man is from us! He's a million miles away from us isn't he? But is he? Is he if you go beyond the surface? We're wealthy, affluent, and healthy. We want for virtually nothing. We're the included, he's the excluded. Yet you don't have to think long about the human condition to realize that beauty and well-being may only be skin deep. Unlike this man, full of leprosy, externally we're fine. But on the inside we can be as damaged and as hurting and as longing for healing as him, because sin, no less than leprosy, erodes and destroys and separates. Because though we are made in the image of God that image is disfigured by sin as surely as leprosy disfigures the body.

Pride destroys friendships: you take offence at something someone says and the walls of separation go up. Pornography destroys intimacy, and a growing fissure opens up between a husband and a wife. Outbursts of uncontrolled anger scar families, and children grow up afraid of their fathers. And the love of money can eat away at your soul as leprosy eats away at flesh, consuming anything that stands in its way, including love for wife or husband or children. So ours can be a skin-deep well-being, while underneath are hurting hearts and fractured lives.

And just as leprosy effectively excluded people from the community of God's people, so sin does the same. It erects this wall of separation and exclusion between man and God and between man and God's people. Sin, like leprosy, banishes men and women outside the camp, outside the town, outside the city of God.

So what does this man do? If he is to be restored and brought back in to the fold of love and relationship with friends and family and community and with God, through His people what does he do? The answer is he goes in search of Jesus, who is both willing and able.

2. Jesus: Willing and Able

Luke tells us in v12 that this encounter happens when Jesus 'was in one of the cities'. But if lepers were excluded from the cities, what is this man doing there? The answer is, he's desperate. His situation is desperate, he's desperate and he's prepared to break the rules to go in search of Jesus. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says in 11:6 that God 'rewards those who seek him.' And there is a vast

difference between the casual enquirer and the diligent seeker, between the man who is easily put off and the one who will do what it takes to get through to God.

And when he sees Jesus, Luke tells us (v12), 'he fell on his face' before Jesus. Now, if you were here last week you'll remember that someone else, no less than Simon Peter, fell on his face before Jesus, so aware was he of his own sinfulness, begging Jesus to leave him. Well this man, full of leprosy falls to his face before Jesus, not begging Jesus to leave him, but begging to be cleansed: to be healed and restored.

And on his face before Jesus he begs Jesus, v12, 'Lord…' –same way Peter talked to Jesus, which is way more than some polite greeting, he's come to Jesus because he knows from what he's heard that Jesus can deal with this, that Jesus has authority over this. He knows that if only Jesus is willing, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.'

Now notice that he doesn't doubt that Jesus can do it. That's not his question to Jesus. He doesn't stand before Jesus and ask him 'Jesus are you able to do this, do you think your powers are up to this, does a case like mine fit in with your area of expertise? Or should I look elsewhere?' No, he throws himself before Jesus, he knows Jesus can heal him and cleanse him. The only question in his mind is: will He? Jesus, Lord, I know you can heal me, but will you, are you willing Lord? I want to be restored to my family, I want to hold my children, I want to lie beside my wife, I want to hold her in my arms, I want to walk with God's people to God's house again. I know you can do it Lord, but will you?

And in coming to Jesus this man is risking yet another rejection, yet another devastating humiliation. If Jesus says 'no', he would have to leave again with everyone watching – the Leper who presumed to come. But that's not the way it works with Jesus. In John 6:35-37 Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst… All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.'

You will never be humiliated or spurned or sent away if you come to Jesus in faith knowing that He's the only one who can help you. And that is what this man does and in v13 Luke tells us that 'Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him.' This man who hasn't known anyone's touch for however many years, Jesus touches. Jesus is willing to become unclean to make this man clean, He humbles Himself to lift this man up. It's the same Jesus who within 3 years will go to the cross and become sin – and give His life for us, the righteous for the unrighteous, the clean for the unclean.

And Jesus says to this man, with his hand on his shoulder, 'I will' – I am both able and willing to do it. 'Be clean.' And immediately, Luke says, the leprosy left him. Jesus doesn't make him leap through any hoops, He doesn't set him any religious tasks, he doesn't have to do any penance, he doesn't have to earn or deserve this cleansing, with just one word Jesus heals him and cleanses him and restores him.

Church, when it comes to being restored to God, when it comes to a well-being of heart and soul that is more than skin-deep, when it comes to finding your way back into the covenant people of God, there is no unwillingness on God's part. Jesus doesn't keep you at arms length. The tragedy is, it's us who do that, keeping ourselves at arms length from Jesus. You consider your past or the mess you've made and think 'he would never have me.' Listen, no-one is off limits for Jesus, and as one commentator (Bock) has said 'those who appeal to Jesus for help, find grace.'

But like this leper, you've got to come. The gospel calls everyone to come, to repent, to put their faith in Jesus, and you will find God willing to rescue and restore: Paul describes God as our savior 'who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4). And Peter says that God does not wish 'that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9). So if you're a Christian but you feel this alienation between you and God or His people because of sin and guilt, and you haven't got leprosy but you feel unclean and slimed by sin; or if you're not yet a Christian, but you realize it's you who's keeping Jesus at arms length, then follow the example of this leper: take the risk, seek Jesus out, humble yourself and ask Him to cleanse you and forgive you and you will find Him both willing and able.

And when Jesus says to this man in v13 'Be clean' he uses a passive verb. This isn't something the man can do for himself. Jesus doesn't say "clean your act up". He can't make himself clean, if he could he wouldn't have sought Jesus out in the first place. This was outside his power to do, just as its outside our power to change our hearts or wash ourselves clean from the staining effects of sin. Only Jesus could do it for him. And He does. But that's fine for this leper, but what about us, who can't enjoy the physical touch of Jesus stretching out his hand to us. How does God do it for us?

Well, there's a clue here in the passage. Third point.

3. Jesus: the final sacrifice

This man is instantly healed, and that's not just his skin, and Luke tells us in v14 And Jesus charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them."

And according to the Old Testament Law the whole process of cleansing that now followed this healing required sacrifices (Lev 14:1-32). The man would take two birds to the temple and the priests would kill one of them, and dip the other in its blood. And then the blood of the first bird would be sprinkled on the now cleansed leper, and the second now blood stained bird would be released to fly away. Then one week later the man would take a lamb to be sacrificed, and some of the blood of the lamb would be put on the man's right ear, and right thumb and right big toe, symbolic of the whole body once affected now cleansed by blood. And then the former leper was readmitted to society.

And these Old testament sacrifices were shadows, sign-posts pointing us to the one to come who would fulfill all the sacrifices in himself and make them

obsolete. And this man gets cleansed by Jesus touch' and His word, and it's confirmed by sacrifices. You and I get cleansed from the sin and guilt and shame that can riddle our lives just as much as leprosy did this man, not by offering birds and lambs, but by the sacrifice of Jesus Himself – the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world - His life for our life. And just as one blood stained bird got to fly free, so we get to go free because one blood-stained man gave his life for us. And no further sacrifice for sins is necessary.

4. What stops you from coming?

Now Jesus might have wanted to keep this quiet, but there seems little chance of that. Luke doesn't tell us what the other gospel writers do, that far from this man keeping a low profile, he tells just about everyone he can find what Jesus has done for him. So Luke tells us in v15 'But now even more the report about Him [Jesus] went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities.' This wasn't just ear-tickling good preaching, this was the Kingdom of God coming with power.

So this was Jesus' chance. This was His chance to capitalize on this miracle and build His mega church. Fame and potentially fortune were within grasp. And yet Luke tells us in v16 'But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.'

Jesus doesn't allow either the pull of popularity or the weight of business, or even the seemingly endless need of the people to keep Him from getting alone with His heavenly father in prayer.

Now, if you are anything like me, and I suspect you are, there are probably a thousand things that easily distract you from prayer, or, taking it a step further, that suffocate your spiritual growth by robbing you of time alone with God.

Firstly, and perhaps most innocently there is the sheer business of life. There are kids to dress, and meals to prepare and laundry to be done and homework to be helped with and there's work to go to. If you're married you need to work this out together. You need to sit down together and work out how you can serve one another by freeing up time so that the other one can find five or ten minutes simply to get alone with God. If Jesus needed that, don't you think you or your spouse does?

But there's other stuff as well. In the parable of the sower Jesus said that some people respond eagerly to the word of God – they hear it, they respond to it, they show every evidence of new life, but then something else happens. While they spring up like green shoots, so too do thorns and they begin to strangle the life out of the green shoots. And Jesus identifies those thorns as the cares and riches and pleasures of life. So here is Jesus, prepared to forgo success and popularity to get time alone with God, saying to you and me: you will face the same challenge. It's not just the powers of darkness that can keep you from prayer, it's not just the cares and the worries of life that can consume you and stunt spiritual growth, but so too can the good stuff, the blessings, the riches and pleasures of life. They stop you from coming. And they do so by becoming the ultimate thing in your

life, or when the pursuit of them becomes your driving motivation. And you go in search of them rather than in search of God.

In the UK, when Government ministers resign they normally give as their reason that they want to spend more time with their families. Well, when one wealthy minister resigned from the Cabinet, the media joked that he did so to spend more time with his money. Which is funny and sad at the same time. It would be no less sad for you and I to be so engrossed with God's gifts that our hearts grow cold to the Giver.

And here is Jesus, facing all the pressures of life and ministry and the sea of need around Him, making time alone with His Father a priority. May God make us a people who know where true power lies, who can distinguish between the gifts and the giver, and who despite all the pressures and business carve out the time to spend with the one who sent this Leper away whole.