

# Beyond 'Unclean'

Mark 1:40-45    1 Kings 5:1-14  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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Just what do you suppose it meant in biblical times to be 'clean' or 'unclean,' 'pure' or 'polluted'? **How have we carried these concepts of who's 'in,' and who's 'out' into our own day and age – both culturally and religiously?**

Both the Old Testament and New Testament readings today deal with this issue, specifically as how it applies to two different persons who were healed from leprosy. A good portion of the Old Testament book of Leviticus addresses laws that fall under the general heading of what is called the "**Purity Code.**" The violation of these ancient laws dictated a system of ritual and moral impurity.

Ritual impurity is caused primarily by certain natural functions of the human body, most of which are necessary, routine, and unavoidable. Ritual impurity, however, was considered to be **contagious**. Therefore, persons who touched someone else who had been determined by a priest to be ritually unclean, became unclean themselves.

The consequences were drastic. Impurity was seen as a threat to the covenant relationship that Israel had with God. It prevented one from attending public worship, because the sanctuary in the synagogue would be considered contaminated. In some cases, like the wide-range of skin diseases that fell under the larger category called leprosy (not just what we call leprosy today), it resulted not only in religious ostracism but also in social isolation. It states in Leviticus 13:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

**Leprosy was the ultimate 'scarlet letter'. That's because persons were banished from the community. They were literally cast out and isolated from family and friends and the religious community.** Strangely, this category of leprosy also referred to mold and fungus found in houses and fabrics. Affected stoned had to be removed, and affected fabrics had to be burned.

Before we get too critical of ancient Israel's purity laws, however, it needs to be stated that **societies in every day and age – including our own – have taboos of various sorts that mark and enforce barriers by labeling the undesirable element 'unclean' and referring to the 'in' group as 'clean.'** Purity laws act as a marker of cultural identity of just what is and isn't acceptable. This was especially true of ancient Jewish identity.

Now, where does Jesus fit into all this? It appears that he was an observant Jew, therefore understood and followed the Judaic purity laws. And yet, as the story of Jesus touching and healing the man with leprosy in Mark 1 indicates, **Jesus wasn't above breaking some laws in order to fulfill others – like loving one's neighbor as oneself.** Numerous stories throughout the gospels reveal that Jesus regularly violated political,

social, religious and ritual norms and boundaries. That got him into a lot of trouble, and eventually killed.

Today's Gospel Lesson, where Jesus actually touches, heals and restores an 'unclean' person with leprosy to wholeness, is a classic and dramatic example. As previously stated, leprosy was not only a medical condition, but also a disease that came with a particular theological understanding. For instance, **people tended to interpret leprosy as God's punishment for sin** – as a divine curse, no less, in several Old Testament stories. **There are far too many people in our day and age, in my opinion, who jump to the same erroneous conclusion – that when they get sick or face some disease, God is punishing them for their sinfulness.** I'm sure you remember 10-20 years ago, for example, when certain religious leaders claimed that HIV/AIDS was divine punishment. But that's another sermon.

I want us to take note that in Mark's story, the man with leprosy does not ask to be 'cured' (which is a medical request), but to be 'made clean' (which is a social and spiritual request). To be declared 'clean' meant that the sufferer and outcast could once again live and worship with others. **Social and religious acceptability, the restoration of one's spiritual and social status, seems to be as important as the physical healing itself.** That remains true for us today, a parallel that we can make in our own society, culture and church. While the physical healing of an illness is always important to us, so is the sense that we aren't considered by others to be social and religious outcasts. Far too many things today still carry stigmas of one sort or another. Shame is often the result, and persons often decide to suffer in silence. That, in itself, is a shame.

It is also very significant to note that Jesus actually touches the person who suffered from leprosy and came to him to be made clean. In a remarkably ironic plot twist, which is easy to miss in this story, we learn that **it is not the person with leprosy who is contagious, but Jesus.** Think about it. **In a stunning reversal of purity code standards, the person who suffered from leprosy does not transmit his uncleanness to Jesus. Rather, Jesus transmits his wholeness and spiritual cleanliness (which we call holiness) to this person in need, making him clean – physically, spiritually, and socially.**

In this story, being touched by Jesus – by the presence of God – means that the outcast's isolation and very humanity are restored. By extension, then, and by the grace of God's loving presence, **we too can find restoration of our isolation and humanity!**

If the Gospels teach us anything about Jesus, it is that he regarded human need as more important than strictly following religious and societal rituals and regulations. **Jesus' ministry brought him in direct contact with sinners and outcasts and those in need. Again, using Jesus' ministry as a guide for our own, should not our ministry do the same?** Jesus' work of lifting others up placed him among the fallen. His words of encouragement were given in the presence of those without hope. His ability to heal put him in contact with those who suffered. That model of ministry, which many like to refer to as a ministry of presence, has direct implications for all of us, and especially for the role of the church.

This is something that College Hill has understood for decades: like when members of this congregation housed Japanese-American university students during WWII who were threatened when many of their nationality were being rounded up. Like when this church addressed issues of racial and gender equality in the 60s and 70s. Like when this congregation housed refugees from Central America in the 1980s in what was called the Sanctuary movement. Like when College Hill publically declared in 2000 that

this community of faith was open to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, and was willing to ordain them into leadership positions in the church.

Saying that, the following question still begs to be asked: **Who are you and I afraid to touch, and not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually and socially as well? Do we not, in all actuality, have our own boundary issues, things outside our comfort zone, people whom we think will somehow 'contaminate' us? Do we not, in fact, have our own internal 'purity code?'**

Yet as Jesus demonstrated, we are called to touch the untouchable and those who are forgotten, excluded or considered outcasts in our own communities? I'll let you come up with your own list of those whom our society and religious institutions still tend to throw into that category of 'lepers' in our day and time. But let's not think that we're immune from doing this as well. As I have stated for years, **just because we include those that certain others exclude, doesn't necessarily make us all-inclusive.**

What we learn from this biblical story is that following Jesus would have us remove societal and self-imposed boundaries that act to separate anyone from God and each other. For God works outside the boundaries and boxes that organized religion continues to try to force God into. Or as one biblical commentator writes, "God continues to color outside the lines."

**God reaches out to touch the untouchable and goes beyond what some label as 'unclean,' and so should we. No one should be made to 'live outside the camp.'**

So I pray that we here at College Hill, as we enter into our second century of ministry, will continue to increase our compassion for those whom others label as 'unclean' and unacceptable, seeking to accept them as *already* included in God's gracious embrace and care and family.

Amen.

Resource:  
*The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*