

Sermon for Sunday, October 19, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"ASKING THE RIGHT PERSON"

St. Luke 5:12-16

Text: "While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and besought Him, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.'" St. Luke 5:12

I want to introduce you to a man who was in desperate need. We do not know his name, but we do know that his situation was the very worst. He was a leper. Physically that had some dreadful consequences. Leprosy kills the nerve endings so that in his extremities he could feel nothing. If a sandal thong was too tight, it could cause a terrible sore before he was aware of it. If he got too close to the fire, he had no warning of danger until he smelled the dreadful stench of burning flesh. If he worked, he could not feel the warning pain of a blister until the blood began to flow.

But, as the leper discovered, there are pains more intense than physical pains. Jewish law ruled that a leper must separate himself from the rest of society. He must leave his family and loved ones and live in awful isolation. He must wear distinctive clothing so that he could be recognized for what he was at a glance. If someone inadvertently wandered too close, he must cry out "unclean, unclean." The physical consequences of his disease were bad enough, but the heart-rending pain of tearing himself away from wife, from children, from loved ones was far worse. To be isolated and separated from human society was dreadful indeed.

A lot of us this morning can share the hurt of the leper. There may be some physical disability we have to live with, such as cancer, or arthritis, or cataracts, or other bodily problem. Worse still, there may be some loneliness we must endure: the loneliness of a loved one gone, a marriage broken, a child who has disappointed. There may be some isolation of the heart caused by some wrong decision, some secret sin, some overwhelming guilt. I dare say there is not a person present this morning but that in one way or another we can identify with the suffering of the leper. Is your heart heavy this morning? Is there some sorrow, some sin, some failure that rests heavily on you today? Then you can sympathize with the desolation of the leper.

That's the first thing I want you to notice this morning. The leper was a man in need. The second thing I want you to notice is this: the Bible tells us he saw Jesus, and fell on his face. I want you to realize how unusual that is. There were a lot of people around Jesus that day. Multitudes were already beginning to collect around him. But not many of them fell on their face. Why did the leper do that? Was it not because he saw in Jesus something or someone who was very special?

Do you remember when you accepted Jesus as your Saviour? At that moment it was not because you had not seen him before or heard of him before. But in some moment of insight, or some moment of need, you suddenly saw him not as some figure of the past, or as some figure you had heard of, but you saw him as your personal saviour and invited him into your heart. So, when the Bible says the leper saw Jesus and fell on his face, I think it means something special.

Have you seen Jesus with the eyes of the heart? Do you remember the famous painting of Durer called "The Praying Hands"? Why have those hands of a workman, with nails dirty and torn, become so famous? Let me tell you how those hands came to be painted. Durer and his best friend desperately wanted to be artists. However, they did not have the necessary money for lessons and instruction. The friend struck a bargain with Durer. He would work and support them while Durer took lessons and when Durer was a great artist, he would pay for the lessons of his friend. The only work available was hard, manual labor. By the time Durer had finished his studies, the hard work had so stiffened the fingers of his friend they would never be able to do the delicate work with a brush that is required of an artist. In a very real sense, he had sacrificed himself for Durer. One night, as they were going to bed, Durer saw his friend kneeling beside his bed with his hands folded before him in prayer. It was that picture that he captured and put on canvas. But the picture is more than work-hardened hands, torn nails and stiff fingers. Somehow he has captured something almost holy. You see, he saw with the eyes of the heart, with the deepest feelings of his being, and transferred that to canvas.

Does that make sense to you? For each of us, there must come that time when we see Jesus with our hearts. Once Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" That is, how do people see me? But it was his disciples who saw him with their hearts of faith, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God." Well, that's what happened to the leper that day. He saw Jesus--not with his physical eyes alone, but with his heart, also. That's why the Bible says that when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face before him. Somehow in Jesus he saw the answer to his deepest needs.

This brings us to the third thing I would like to call to your attention. First, the leper had a desperate need. Second, he saw Jesus. But third, he believed Jesus was the answer to his problem. Listen to what the Bible says: "Lord, if you will, you can..." When life tumbles in, who or what can meet your deepest need? When your heart is broken and tears wet your cheeks, who can touch you at your deepest point of need with love and healing and help? Well, the leper believed Jesus could do that. He said, "if you will, you can."

Recently I read a tragic story that I want to share with you. It is the heart-rending story of a man who took his own life. In his pocket they found a child's crayon drawing, much folded and worn. On it the man had written, "Please leave in my coat pocket. I want to have it buried with me." It was a drawing signed with the awkward scrawl of a child and it said, "Shirley." Investigation discovered that five months before, Shirley had perished in a tragic tenement fire. The father was so grief-stricken that he had stopped total strangers on the street to ask them to attend Shirley's funeral so that she would have a nice service. He said there was no family to attend as Shirley's mother had died when the child was two years old. A reporter, who got interested in the story had talked to the father and the man explained how terribly lonely he was and that the only important thing in his life was gone. He said it was better to be dead than to live in an impersonal world with no one to love and no one to love back. So, he finally took his life. He left his insurance to the church where Shirley had gone to Sunday School along with a note. It said, "Maybe in ten or twenty years someone will see the plaque with her name and wonder who Shirley Ellen Lee was, and say, 'Someone must have loved her very, very much.'" Well, the story of Shirley is tragic enough, but the story of her father is a double tragedy. You see, he was so caught up in his grief he did not believe anyone--not even Jesus--could help him.

Whatever you need this morning, do you believe Jesus can help you? The leper did. This brings us to the fourth thing I want to share with you this morning, and it is this: the leper asked Jesus to heal him. He said, "...make me clean." Many of us this morning are living sad, unhappy, defeated lives. One of the major reasons is simply because we have not invited Jesus into our lives to touch us with his love and his healing. If you will read your New Testament carefully I think you will make this discovery: never once did Jesus refuse to help someone who asked him. Do you remember how he himself once put it? He said, "Ask and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you." (St. Luke 11:9)

It is a strange thing, but while many people believe in the power of God, they never invite Jesus into their hearts to bring his love and his healing. Too often we are guilty of asking God to deal with external things that are of deep concern to us, but never asking him to come into our hearts and take control of our lives. So often Jesus wants to help us, but he cannot. Why? Because he will not force himself on us or batter down the door to our hearts. Instead, he says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him..." Yes, he knocks, but we must open the door. We must invite him in. If you are living a defeated, tragic life this morning it may very well be because you have not asked Jesus to come into your heart to control your life, to bring you healing and peace.

There is one final thing I want to say to you this morning about our text. It is this: When the leper saw Jesus with eyes of the heart, when he believed that Jesus could meet his every need, when he then asked Jesus to help him, this is what the Bible says, "And he stretched out his hand, and touched him, saying, 'I will; be cleaned.'"

You know, if I had been there that day and the leper had come to me and asked for my help, my heart would have been deeply touched. With all my being I would have wanted to help him. But had he asked for my help, he would have been asking the wrong person. I could not have helped him. I have people come to my study with desperate problems and always my heart yearns to help them and to heal their hurts and heartaches--but I cannot. As I visit in homes or in the hospitals, I often see dreadful conditions that make my heart ache for the hurt and suffering. I desperately want to help, but I cannot.

So many people today are going to the wrong thing or the wrong person for help. Some try drugs to escape, some try alcohol. Some try high living and loose morals. Some depend on palm readers or astrologists or eastern cults. Some depend on friends or money or parties or trips. But--in the end--there is still an empty vacuum in their lives for none of those things meet the deepest needs of the heart.

Where are you seeking for the answer to your needs this morning? Who or what can solve the desperate heartaches so many of us have? Well, the only one who can do that is Jesus.

Are you lost this morning? A lot of people are. But if you offered a million dollars to someone who could save your immortal soul--while there would be many willing to try--no one could do it. That is, no one but Jesus.

Out in California is a place called Death Valley. It is one of the most desolate places in the world, 100 miles long and varying from 10 to 35 miles wide. On one occasion, due to a freak in the weather, rain fell for 19 consecutive days in this barren region. The desert became resplendent with lilies, buttercups, posies, larkspur, columbines, indian paintbrush, and countless other flowers that no one dreamed their seeds lay hidden in that forsaken land. When the right thing happened, a desert became a garden.

Is there some desert in your soul this morning? Well, there is someone who loves you very, very much. He wants to make your desert into a garden and he is the only one who can do it. His name is Jesus. He is the right person to ask--and all you have to do is to ask.