

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰ A leper came to him (and kneeling down) begged him and said, “If you wish, you can make me clean.” ⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, “I do will it. Be made clean.” ⁴² The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. ⁴³ Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. ⁴⁴ Then he said to him, “See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.” ⁴⁵ The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

Context

One descriptive outline of this first major section is:

Jesus’ Authority and the Pharisees’ Blindness (1:14-3:6)

1. Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom of God and entrance to Galilee(1:14-15)
2. The Call of the First Disciples (1:16-20)
3. Jesus’ Authority Over Demons and Illness (1:21-45)
 - a) The Beginnings in Capernaum – a new teaching authority (1:21-28)
 - b) Healing Peter’s Mother-in-law (1:29-31)
 - c) The Sick Healed at Evening (1:32-34)
 - d) Departure from Capernaum (1:35-39)
 - e) **Cleansing a Leper (1:40-45)** | *our text*
4. Jesus’ Authority Over Sin and the Law – the Growing Conflict (2:1-3:6)
 - a) Healing the Paralytic – the authority to forgive sin (2:1-12)
 - b) The Call of Levi (2:13-14)
 - c) The Messiah Eats with Sinners (2:15-17)
 - d) Jesus and Fasting (2:18-22)
 - e) Sabbath: Violations and Lord of the Sabbath (2:23-28)
 - f) Healing the Withered Hand - Jesus must be destroyed (3:1-6)

Donald Juel, (*Mark*, 43) connects our text with what follows. He puts Mark 1:40-3:6 together and titles the section “Transgressor of the Boundaries.” He states: “Jesus’ healing of the leper is the first of several stories that deal with Jesus’ violation of ritual boundaries.”

Commentary

The healing of the leper is a remarkable scene, full of marked contrasts. It is a fitting conclusion to Mark’s first chapter. The powerful but misunderstood Messiah is approached directly by a person who is normally denied any contact with healthy people. This outcast’s trust in Jesus is met by the pity and power of his touch and word. However, the leper’s exhilaration at his cure is dampened by a stern repetition of Jesus’ prohibitive messianic secret: “Tell no one anything!” (v. 44). (Only the priest is to know, because only his word can allow the outcast to re-enter the society from which his sickness has kept him.)

Instead of following Jesus’ word, the cured man tells everyone! And Jesus’ mission is thwarted as soon as it begins: “It was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly” (v. 45). Through this concluding story of chapter 1, Mark asks all Christian followers to take Jesus at his word. He asks them to take Jesus seriously, as he is, at his pace on the journey, and in his time. To be a Christian is to respond to Jesus’ word with fidelity, whether that word is “Be made clean” or “Tell no one anything!”

Leprosy and the Man

The identification of the man who came to Jesus as “a leper” is not as precise as at first glance it may seem. Medical researchers who have examined the biblical data in Lev. 13–14 feel certain that the biblical term “leprosy” is a collective noun designating a wide variety of chronic skin diseases, one of which may have been interpreted in the modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, anyone who was identified as a leper was reduced to a most pitiful state of existence. In addition to the physical ravages of the disease, his cultic impurity was graphically described in the Levitical provision: “The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean’. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation without the camp” (Lev. 13:45 *ff*). Rabbinic refinement of the biblical legislation imposed many practical difficulties upon the leper, for even a chance encounter between the leper and the non-leper could render the latter unclean. Lepers were allowed to live unhampered wherever they chose, except in Jerusalem and cities which had been walled from antiquity. They could even attend the synagogue services if a screen was provided to isolate them from the rest of the congregation. In spite of these two provisions, however, leprosy brought deep physical and mental anguish for both the afflicted individual and the community in which or near which he lived. It is against this background that the significance of the cleansing of a leper by Jesus can be appreciated, whether the man in Mark’s account had true leprosy or some other frightful skin disease.

The leper, who had either seen Jesus’ mighty works or had heard about them, came beseeching Jesus to remove from him the ravages and stigma of this dreadful disease. In the firm conviction, “If you will you can make me clean,” he is asking for healing, not for the pronouncement that he is clean ritually, which only a priest could declare. It may be assumed that the man had shown himself to a priest once or several times already. His appeal was for Jesus to do what was believed impossible by human means, to cure him of his disease. It is impossible to tell whether he regarded Jesus as an itinerant miracle-worker, or perceived more deeply that he was one through whom the power of God was directed.

Jesus’ Reaction

There is a minority text that chooses to translate Jesus’ reaction as , “moved with indignation (or anger),” it is necessary to determine the subject of the phrase. The proposal that the subject is the leper, who became so overwhelmed with his virtually hopeless plight that in blind rage he touched Jesus, is grammatically possible. The admonition in v. 43 would then have specific reference to this act after the leper had been made whole and was in a frame of mind to receive the rebuke. This would remove the difficulties posed by the strong words in 1:41 and 43. It is not likely, however, that this interpretation is correct, for it too easily removes the offense that later scribes clearly sensed in the text, and which gave rise to the predominantly attested reading, “moved with compassion.” Assuming that Jesus is the subject, the anger can be understood as an expression of righteous indignation at the ravages of sin, disease and death which take their toll even upon the living, a toll particularly evident in a leper. As such, Jesus’ encounter with the leper brings him once more into the sphere of the demonic. It is, perhaps, in this perspective that elements in the narrative which seem more appropriate to an exorcism narrative than to an account of healing are to be explained.

Jesus’ Actions

The treatment of Jesus consisted of a gesture and a pronouncement. The touch of Jesus was significant from two points of view. From the perspective of the leper it was an unheard-of act of compassion which must have moved him deeply and strengthened him in his conviction he had not asked for help in vain. From the perspective of Jesus’ relationship to the cultic and ritual system, it indicated that he did not hesitate to act in violation of its regulations when the situation demanded: “the ceremonial law gives place to the law of love when the two come into collision.” Jesus’ touch and his sovereign

pronouncement mean the same thing: “I will, be clean.” This was not a priestly pronouncement, as is made clear in verses 43–44, but a declaration that healing would follow immediately and completely. The text describes an instantaneous radical healing which was visible to all who met the man.

The difficulty confronting the interpreter in the reference to anger in v.41 recurs in v. 43. The language is very strong, and seems more appropriate in an address to a demon than to a man whom Jesus has just healed: “*warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.*” While it is possible to give a milder translation of the terms used, the statement is intelligible as an expression of Jesus’ exasperation because he foresaw the disobedience of the man. It is explicitly stated in v.45 that Jesus was hindered from entering any further towns as a result of the man’s failure to heed Jesus’ injunction. As a consequence, the preaching mission within the synagogues of Galilee, reported in v.39, was interrupted.

Jesus commanded the former leper to be silent concerning his healing, and instructed him to show himself to the priests, who alone could declare him clean, and to offer the sacrifices prescribed in the Mosaic Law. The procedure to be followed was set forth in Lev. 14:2–31, and involved different offerings depending on whether the man was poor or prosperous. In the first century the man had first to show himself to a priest in his place of residence, after which he must go to Jerusalem to be pronounced clean and to make the prescribed sacrifices.

Jesus’ demand that the man comply with Mosaic regulation is qualified by the words “that will be proof for them.” This phrase may be interpreted differently depending on whether the testimony is considered to be positive or negative in character, and whether the people or the priests are in view. In keeping with the somber tone of the narrative it seems necessary to interpret the phrase in the negative sense demanded in the second instance where it occurs: “as a testimony *against them.*” Scholarly investigation has shown that the concept “testimony” or “witness” here, as in many passages, has the meaning of incriminating testimony which may serve as evidence for the prosecution. “Testimony” means a piece of proof which may be recalled and which can become an accusation. It is better to understand “them” as the priests, for it is they who must examine the man to determine whether the leprosy has been removed. Jesus’ statement then means that if the priests establish that healing has taken place and accept the sacrifice for cleansing but fail to recognize the person and power through whom healing has come, they will stand condemned by the very evidence which they have supplied. The healing of the leper demonstrated that God had done something new. If they neglect this sign or deliberately refer this gracious act to an evil origin, the accomplished sacrifice will testify against them on the day of judgment. It was, therefore, imperative that the man comply with Jesus’ instruction. It was necessary on his own behalf, but more important, he was to provide the evidence of the new thing God was doing, which if met with unbelief would serve as incriminating evidence against the priests.

It is not known whether the man obeyed the injunction to show himself to a priest. He blatantly disregarded the injunction to silence, and assumed the posture of a missionary, declaring publicly over an extended area what he had experienced from Jesus. The result was that Jesus’ ministry in the synagogue was hampered, for he was no longer able to enter any town without encountering crowds of people waiting to throng one who could heal a leper, claiming benefactions for themselves. This was not the mission Jesus had come to fulfill. When he withdrew to places of solitude the people pursued him, but they understood neither Jesus nor the significance of his withdrawal to a place which recalled the wilderness in which his submission to the Father had been affirmed.

The Man Responds

This incident has an important position in the Marcan outline. It serves to terminate the preaching tour of the Galilean villages and provides the point of transition to the five accounts of controversy which follow (Ch. 2:1–3:6). The pericope establishes the surpassing nature of the salvation which Jesus

brings, for while the Law of Moses provided for the ritual purification of a leper it was powerless to actually purge a man of the disease. In all of the OT only twice is it recorded that God had healed a leper (Num. 12:10 ff.; 2 kings 5:1 ff.), and the rabbis affirmed that it was as difficult to heal the leper as to raise the dead. The cleansing of the leper indicates the new character of God's action in bringing Jesus among men. Salvation transcends cultic and ritual regulations, which were powerless to arrest the hold that death had upon the living, and issues in radical healing.

Notes

Mark 1:40 leper: A disease in humans (also known as Hansen's disease) caused by the *bacillus Mycobacterium leprae*. This term "leprosy" is commonly used (more for convenience than medical accuracy) as a translation of Hebrew *šāra 'at* in the OT and Gk *lepra* in the NT. Scholars now generally agree that OT *sāra 'at* is not leprosy nor does it include it and that NT *lepra*, if it refers at all to leprosy, does so only as one among many skin conditions. [AYBD 277]

If you wish: Since the healing of leprosy was thought to require divine intervention, there is thought that the wording implies a realization of Jesus' messiahship, embodying the power and will of God.

Mark 1:41 moved with pity: *splanchnizomai* – have pity [EDNT 3:265]. A few MSS, of which D and some Old Latin renderings are the most important, read "moved with anger." Some argue that this is the harder reading, because it is more difficult to explain a copyist's move from compassion to anger. If it were original, then Jesus' anger would be set against the man's condition, not his request (Luke 13:16). But compassion is slightly more likely to be the original sense, given the overwhelming external spread of the MSS. Mark loved to note Jesus' emotions; here, Jesus acted graciously out of compassion for the man's plight. The healing would be extended with a symbolic touch, since Jesus' power to cleanse was greater than leprosy's power to stain (contrast 2 Kgs 5:1–14; Num 12:9–15). The significance of this is more clear in other Gospel texts (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22).

Mark 1:42 immediately: the cure is instantaneous at the word of Jesus

Mark 1:43 warning him sternly. The Gr. verb *embrimaomai* lit. means "to snort" or "be indignant" (Mark 14:5; John 11:33, 38). Jesus sternly restricted the public announcement of what had taken place while urging the leper to follow the law by showing himself to the priest so he could be declared clean (1:44; Lev 14:1–20). Mark notes such calls to silence with respect to demons (1:34; 3:12), those healed (1:43–44; 5:43; 7:36), and the disciples (8:30; 9:9).

Mark 1:44 that will be proof for them. This was a recognition of God's gracious work of healing through Jesus. The Greek also allows for the interpretation, "a testimony against them." In other spots where this expression appears, it is negative, meaning "against them" (6:11; 13:9). The meaning appears to be that the evidence of God's acting through Jesus (when the healed man offered a sacrifice) would stand as a testimony against the priests when they came to reject the reality that God was working through Jesus.

Mark 1:45 But the man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. The cleansed leper did not obey Jesus and Jesus got the publicity he had hoped to avoid. **publicize.** Interestingly, the man "preached" (*kērussō*) his testimony.

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