

Tony Campolo is a sociologist at Eastern University at St. David's in Pennsylvania and is a well known Christian speaker and author as well. Many times students will come to him and state, "I don't believe in God!" and the first thing Dr. Campolo has them do is to describe the God that they don't believe in. The majority of the time, the God that they describe is a mean, vindictive, judgmental God who stands in Heaven waiting for the right opportunity to mess up your life, and when they say that they don't believe in God, Tony Campolo will say, "Good! I don't believe in that God either." Then he will explain to them the true nature of God.

Many people are just like those kids in that they have a misunderstanding of who God really is and what He is truly like. Who is God? What is He like? And what is at the center of His heart? Well, the best answer to the questions can be found by looking at Jesus Christ. The best way to know God the Father is to look at God the Son. When Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus responded by saying, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." **John 1:18** says, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."

Jesus has revealed to us the true nature of God, not a vindictive angry God who seeks to ruin your life, but a God full of grace and mercy, a God of all compassion. And one of the best examples I know of to show this compassion comes from our story that we just read today. By looking at the story of this man with leprosy and his contact with Jesus, my goal is that you would leave here today knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt, God's love and concern for you this day.

Now the account of this story is found in all three synoptic Gospels. Both Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell of this incident, but I agree much with Max Lucado on this, and he says that they didn't cover it adequately enough. We don't know the man's name, his life, or anything like that. But we can piece together that story, and what life was like for him by looking at his condition and how it was typically treated in that day and by doing so we get a glimpse into this man's struggle and his pain. Max Lucado referred to him as the ultimate outcast. But he's referred to here simply as a man who had leprosy.

Now in the bible, both old and new testaments, the word leprosy is a broad term that can mean a wide range of skin diseases. The very worst of those is what we know as leprosy today, a condition that is commonly referred to as "Hanson's disease". We don't know how severe this man's skin condition was, but let's assume he had modern leprosy.

Now know that it's a horrible disease. It begins with little specks on the eyelids and on the palms of the hands. Then it spreads over the body and bleaches the hair white. Gradually it covers the skin with scales and oozing sores.

But as bad as it may be on the surface, what takes place under the skin may be worse. Down under the skin, leprosy eats its way to the nerves. And soon the victim loses all sense of touch and pain, initially in the fingers and toes, but eventually spreading to the arms and legs. So what happens, is that the Leper doesn't feel anything. A person could cut his toe to the bone, and not even notice unless he saw the blood.

And as the leprosy advanced, a leper begins to look less and less human. Fingers and toes begin to fall off. Ulcerated growth all over their faith. Sores cover their bodies. Nobody wants to get near them, touch them, or even if notice them. It was, as one man defined it, a death of inches.

But as bad as the pain was physically, it pained in comparison to the emotional suffering that took place. If only the leprosy could numb the heart the way it did the fingers and toes. First, A leper was considered to be unclean. The book of Leviticus set forth that the person who had leprosy had to wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkept, cover the lower part of his face and cry out "unclean! Unclean!" He must also live outside the city gates, away from the people and the world he once knew.

It's hard to imagine what that would be like. I can imagine him walking down a road, being shunned. Little kids looking at him and getting scared and running away. Older kids probably taunted him by throwing rocks at him and calling out names. Adults would simply shake their heads in disgust or worse, not even look his way. ***I remember when I was a teenager in high school, I was at a local Winn Dixie store with my Mom, and I turned the corner of the aisle and there was a woman pushing her cart and in her buggy was a child, and the child had a disfigured face. And instinctively I responded with a knee-jerk reaction. I didn't say anything, I didn't have to. My face said it all. As the mother passed by, I said something polite, and she gave me a disgusted look, I'm guessing she had seen my look before.***

The leper was an outcast. He was banished from the community and treated like he was less than human. The life of leper was one of isolation and loneliness. But perhaps the one thing that the leper lost, the one thing we all need, is the touch of another person. Max Lucado imagined what that must have been like for this man. He wrote: ***"For five years no one touched me. No one. Not one person. Not my wife. Not my child. Not my friends. No one touched me. They saw me. They spoke to me. I sensed love in their***

voices. I saw concern in their eyes. But I didn't feel their touch. There was no touch. Not once. No one touched me. What is common to you, I coveted. Handshakes. Warm embraces. A tap on the shoulder to get my attention. A kiss on the lips to steal a heart. Such moments were taken from my world. No one touched me. No one bumped into me. What I would have given to be bumped into, to be caught in a crowd, for my shoulder to brush against another's. But for five years it has not happened. How could it? I was not allowed on the streets. Even the rabbis kept their distance from me. I was not permitted in my synagogue. Not even welcome in my own house. I was untouchable. I was a leper. And no one touched me."

You can kind of get a glimpse of what life was like for this man. He was unclean, unclean before men, and worse...he was viewed to be unclean before God. He was unable to enter any house of worship, participate in any festival or celebration. It would be the same as if you and I were told that we would no longer be able to celebrate Easter or Christmas. And worse, since it was the common belief that suffering in general, but especially leprosy was a judgment of God upon a sinner...this man must have felt forsaken and abandoned by not only his friends and loved ones, but also by God Himself.

Now let me ask you how would you feel if you were that man? Better yet, how do you feel? You see, it happens today. Now leprosy is not a problem in our churches, but we shun people away. You know the story. You make a mistake in your life. And instead of those you trust in your life providing comfort and forgiveness to you, they instead give you the cold shoulder and gossip behind your back. Something happens to you, you lose your job, you lose your health, you lose your marriage, and automatically you are treated differently. You know what it feels like to be viewed as being unclean. *I know of a preacher who contacted the HIV virus during a blood transfusion. He was a hemophiliac and was in dire need of blood, and the hospital gave him tainted blood. This man's life was torn apart because of this. But with the stigma that came with just the mention of the HIV virus, his church, the church he pastored, quickly showed him the front door and asked him not to come back.*

This leper had a life, but what kind of life was it? He lived in a cave, without love, without hope, with out the simple dignity and joy of being a human being. Things like being greeted on the street, laughing with a friend, getting up to go to work, singing hymns in worship, or feeling the touch of someone who cared. Things we take for granted, were the things that were forbidden.

Now when we get to the part in our text, it doesn't tell us how he came to know of Jesus, or why he even dared to come to Jesus. It simply says he came to Jesus. Max Lucado again imagined it this way, *"Of course it was reckless. Of course it was risky. But what did I have to lose? He calls himself God's Son. Either he will hear my complaint and kill me or accept my demands and heal me. Those were my thoughts. I came to him as a defiant man. Moved not by faith but by a desperate anger. God had wrought this calamity on my body, and he would either fix it or end it.*

But then I saw him, and when I saw him, I was changed. You must remember, I'm a farmer, not a poet, so I cannot find the words to describe what I saw. All I can say is that the Judean mornings are sometimes so fresh and the sunrises so glorious that to look at them is to forget the heat of the day before and the hurt of times past. When I looked at his face, I saw a Judean morning. Before he spoke, I knew he cared. Somehow I knew he hated this disease as much as, no—more—than I hate it. My rage became trust, and my anger became hope. From behind a rock, I watched him descend a hill. Throngs of people followed him. I waited until he was only paces from me, then I stepped out.

"Master!" He stopped and looked in my direction as did dozens of others. A flood of fear swept across the crowd. Arms flew in front of faces. Children ducked behind parents. "Unclean!" someone shouted. Again, I don't blame them. I was a huddled mass of death. But I scarcely heard them. I scarcely saw them. Their panic I'd seen a thousand times. His compassion, however, I'd never beheld. Everyone stepped back except him. He stepped toward me. Toward me."

It's hard to picture the scene, this man who barely looked like a human coming on his knees to Christ. And when he does he says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Now notice that he recognized the authority and power of Christ. "You can make me clean." There was no doubt in that. And notice what he asked for. It wasn't just that he would be healed. He wanted to be clean again. He wanted to be able to go back to his family, to go back to worship God again. To go back to being a human once more.

But notice the third thing he said, "If you are willing." I kind of see that as him saying, "Why would you bother with someone like me, why would you even care about someone like me. No one else does. I know you don't have to, and I wouldn't blame you if you did.

But notice what the text says. It says that when Jesus looked at him, He was filled with Compassion. Someone once defined compassion as your pain in my heart, and the heart of Jesus went out to this man. You see, Jesus

wasn't distant from this man's pain. And God is not distant from our pain. When we hurt, God hurts. Like a Father who hurts for his child, God sees the pain you go through, and He suffers it with you. God is not absent from our pain.

And I believe it was that compassion that caused Jesus to do what He did next. Now Jesus could have spoken the word and the man could have been made well. He did it with Jairus' daughter from many miles away. But not this time. No this time, Jesus reached out His hand, and touched the man. Before a word was said, Jesus reached out and gave this man back his dignity, his humanity, He touched him. And said, "I am willing" and the man was made clean.

Now there may be times when you may doubt God's love and care for you, but if you only hear one thing from this message today, let it be this, God cares for you. 2 Cor 1:3-4 says, "***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles...***" God cares for you and loves you.

One last thing, Could Jesus still have been filled with Compassion and not have healed this man? If Jesus would have said No, I will not make you clean, would we then say that Jesus had no compassion or care for this man? I think not. God's love for us is not solidified by a miracle of healing. He loves the one He doesn't heal just as much as the one He does heal. He said yes to this leper but when the apostle Paul asked 3 times to be healed, God said no each and every time.

I say all this, because God has a funny way of working things. This past week I was up in Memphis and I was going over my message, and I was thinking about this thought, and I was outside a restaurant waiting for the person to bring me my food when the car pulls up. And there is a woman inside of it and she is laughing and smiling up a storm, I thought for a second that's good, life is good for her. But then I noticed her passenger. I guessed it to be her daughter, she looked to be about 7-8 years old, about the same age as my oldest girl. Now the thing that stood out about this little girl was that she didn't have any hair. You could tell, that this was a sick little girl. And I looked at her, and this text kept going through my mind, "If you are willing, you can make me clean!" And I thought God why don't You make her clean." And that's when I thought about this point, does the fact that this little girl had cancer mean that God cared for her any less than my little girl who was well at home? No, not one bit.

You see, God's love for us is not shown by a miracle of healing, and for some reasons I do not know, God does not heal every person. But

God's love for us, His care, His compassion, is solidified not by a healing, but by the cross! This is how much God loves you. This is how much God cares for you! So this morning, as we come to the Lord's table, let this be a time of celebration, and a reminder, of the love that God has for you. Come to the Lord's table today, and listen and hear Him whisper to you, "I care for you."