

# Luke 5:12-15

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*A leper comes to Jesus, asking to be made clean. Jesus touches and miraculously heals the leper instantly. Jesus commands the man to tell no one and to show himself to the priest to make an offering for his cleansing.*

The parallel Gospel accounts for this event are Matthew 8:2-4 and Mark 1:40-45.

*While He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man covered with leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean" (v 12).*

After calling *His* first disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John), Luke records that *Jesus was in one of the cities*. Considering *Jesus's* previous location, this could be the fishing village of Capernaum or one of the other *cities* in the region of Galilee in northern Judea—possibly Genneserat on the northwestern shore of Galilee, Bethsaida on its northeastern shore, or Chorazin up the northern road from Capernaum and in the hills.

Matthew's Gospel account further describes that "large crowds followed Him" after "Jesus came down from the mountain" (Matthew 8:1). In context from Matthew, this "mountain" would be the location of *Jesus's* famous "Sermon on the Mount" found in Matthew 6-8.

Only Matthew's Gospel seems to highlight the teaching event commonly referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount." This sermon espoused *Jesus's* kingdom principles and offered a new and better way to live than the stale legalism of the religious establishment or the pagan hedonism of the Greeks and Romans.

Both the Jewish legalism and the pagan hedonism was an "I win-you lose" system that allowed the elite to exploit those whom they were supposed to serve (Matthew 23:14, 27-28). Through *His* teaching, *Jesus* completely rejected this exploitative way of life and invited *His* followers to live in harmony with God by showing mercy to others and being humble. And *He* taught all of this while fulfilling God's law (Matthew 5:17-18). Luke's Gospel contains many of the teachings *Jesus* taught within the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20-49, 8:16, 18), but he often does so in various contexts.

This demonstrates how *Jesus* probably repeated many of the teachings as *He* traveled in and around Israel proclaiming the kingdom of God. It also supports why some of the details recorded from one similar parable in one Gospel may be different from the details in a similar parable recorded in another. There actually were multiple versions of the same or similar parable said by *Jesus* in different settings which the Gospel writers recorded.

Because both Matthew and Luke describe *Jesus's* healing of the *man covered with leprosy* around the same time they each detail *Jesus's* teachings, it is likely that the Sermon on the Mount where *Jesus* delivered them also occurred around this healing.

Luke tells us that *there was a man covered with leprosy*.

As a doctor, Luke's description is more medically precise than Matthew's and Mark's. The fact that *he was covered with leprosy* indicates that the disease was well advanced and that this *man* may not have been far from death. Luke describes *him* as *a man covered with leprosy* as a way to underscore the humanity of the *man* while describing what afflicted *him*—*covered with leprosy*.

Matthew and Mark simply call *him* “a leper” (Matthew 8:2; Mark 1:40). Matthew and Mark's term focuses on the social aspect of the disease which rendered the *man* an outcast from society—“a leper.” (As a tax collector, Matthew was another kind of outcast). Luke focuses on the physical condition and emphasizes his humanity.

*Leprosy* was a dreaded disease in the ancient world.

Physically, *leprosy* was a skin and flesh disorder that brought about the literal decay of a person's body while they still lived. The first signs of *leprosy* were white spots on the skin (Leviticus 13:4). People *covered with leprosy* often did not know they had *leprosy* until they accidentally cut or injured themselves without feeling any pain. This was because *leprosy* deadened nerve endings and did not send the proper signals to the brain.

Eventually, grotesque sores emerged across their bodies. Pus oozed from these sores as their flesh began to rot (Leviticus 13:10). As *leprosy* progressed, lepers' skin dried and their flesh degenerated. This brought about fiery itching (Leviticus 13:24). People *covered with leprosy* used sticks and broken pottery to scrape and scratch in an attempt to find a moment's relief from the agony. After a time, fingers, toes, ears, or parts of their nose would break off. *Leprosy* continued to disfigure and torment its victims until they finally perished.

Socially, the leper also suffered anguish. *Leprosy* was highly contagious. It had no known cure. Accordingly, lepers were ostracized. They were forbidden to have personal contact with anyone, including their family and friends. From the day they were first declared “unclean” they were cut off from all society (Leviticus 14:46).

All of their relationships and everything they had worked for was taken from them. Their sense of self was stolen from them. Their reputation and name were erased by their affliction. Their identity became their disease—a leper.

Lepers were stigmatized and feared. It was common for Jews at that time to wrongly presume (like Job's friends did of him) that the reason a person had *leprosy* was as punishment from God because of their sin. Perhaps this assumption came from three instances in the Old Testament where people were explicitly stricken with *leprosy* for disobeying God.

- Moses's sister, Miriam suddenly became leprous when the LORD's anger burned against her for trying to usurp Moses's authority.  
(Numbers 12:1-2; 9-10)
- Gehazi, servant of Elisha, begrudged Naaman, the Syrian commander's, healing of leprosy and was so stricken for his malice.  
(2 Kings 5:20-27)

However, this was an inaccurate perspective, as Jesus specifically refuted (John 9:2-3).

The only community that lepers had was to be found in the leper colonies where they would cluster in caves to tend one another as they suffered while awaiting death. Family and friends would bring food near the entrance of these caves for loved ones, but they were careful to keep their distance, lest they too contracted the disease. Whenever a leper ventured away from the colony, they were required to warn others to stay away by ringing a bell or shouting "Unclean! Unclean!" Those downwind of a leper might smell the stink of death whenever they approached. Boys would throw rocks at lepers to keep them at bay.

In addition to the physical torment and social isolation was the shame. People *with leprosy* were burdened with feelings of guilt due to the cultural belief that they had contracted the disease as punishment from God for their sins (Numbers 12:10; 2 Kings 15:5; John 9:2). *Leprosy* rendered a person ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 13:3, 11, 14, 25, 30, 36, 44). Even a leper's clothes were considered to have *leprosy* and be unclean. If the *leprosy* could not be washed out, then their garments and belongings were to be burned (Leviticus 13:47-59).

Similarly, if a house were to continue to have *leprosy* (or mold) after being thoroughly *cleansed* and re-plastered, the building was to be torn down and all its timber discarded (Leviticus 14:33-45). Anyone who entered a leprous house, touched leprous clothing, or came into close proximity to a leper was likewise considered ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 14:46).

Luke writes *when the man covered with leprosy saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord if You are willing, You can make me clean."*

The *man covered with leprosy* who came to *Jesus* demonstrated great faith. It is likely that *he* heard of *Jesus's* ability to miraculously heal (Matthew 4:24) and had come to *Him* in a desperate hope and bold attempt to be made whole. *He* certainly risked, and probably experienced backlash of angry shouts, sharp rebukes (or worse) from onlookers as *he* violated social norms and approached *Jesus*. The *man covered with leprosy* displayed remarkable humility when *he* came to *Jesus*. Recognizing *his* lowly condition, *he fell on his face* before *Him*. Acknowledging Christ's authority, *he implored* and begged *Him*, "*Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.*"

The *man with leprosy's* imploring reveals at least two things about *his* faith in *Jesus*. *He* referred to *Jesus* as "*Lord.*" The *man with leprosy* knew *Jesus* had the power to heal *him*. *He* tells *Jesus*, *You can make me clean*. The *man with leprosy* had a confidence in the power of Christ.

Second, the leper displayed humility. *He began his request with the right perspective. Lord, if You are willing, he said. He does not demand that Jesus make him clean. He understands that Jesus does not owe him health. This humble leper simply utters his request to be made clean, but he leaves it up to Jesus to decide what He will do.*

*He had an attitude that seems to accept whatever outcome God decides. It is a similar attitude that Jesus will display as He prays to His Father hours before He suffers on a cross: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42).*

*By asking to be made clean, the man with leprosy was not just asking to be cured from the physical affliction of his disorder. He was asking to be restored to community among his family and friends. The healing of the disease was the means to that end.*

*So Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately the leprosy left him (v 13).*

*Jesus understood the man with leprosy and Jesus was moved by his request. He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying “I am willing; be cleansed.” The manner in which Jesus chose to heal this man was significant. He could have simply uttered a word or waved a hand and the leper would have been healed. He touched him.*

*Christ did not regard the traditions of ceremonial cleanliness as more important than this man’s brokenness. But by personally touching the man with leprosy with His own hand, Jesus validated his humanity and restored him to the community of human fellowship once again.*

*And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. He was instantly cured. The man was no longer covered with leprosy. The man was healed from leprosy. His body was healthy and the now-former-leper was made whole.*

*Then Jesus ordered him to tell no one, “But go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (v 14).*

*After He healed the man covered with leprosy, Jesus ordered him to tell no one. At first glance, this seems like a strange request. He makes a similar request of His disciples when Jesus affirms to them that He truly is the Messiah (Matthew 16:20). He also forbade demons to tell others that He is the Son of God (Luke 4:35, 41).*

*It could be that Jesus requested this because it simply was not time for Jesus’s identity to be revealed, or His kingdom to be visibly established (John 2:4, 6:15, 7:6). However, after telling the man to tell no one Jesus immediately instructs the man to go and tell and show someone—the priest. This pairing likely meant Jesus was telling the man the priority of who to tell. Jesus told him: show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.*

*To be officially reinstated back into society a leper had to follow certain procedures and offer the appropriate sacrifices that God told to Moses (Leviticus 14:1-32). Jesus’s command to tell no*

*one* was likely about the leper's priority in whom he told first. *Jesus* was asking *him* first to fulfill the instructions of the Mosaic Law for anyone *healed* from *leprosy*. *Jesus* wanted the *man* to present himself to *the priest* and present the offering that Moses commanded.

This was not necessary to give thanks to God, as the *healed man* had opportunity to do in person, since *Jesus* is God. Rather, it was for the purpose of providing a testimony to the priests. When the former leper showed himself to the priests, they would naturally want to know how *he* became *clean* and healthy. *He* would tell them it was *Jesus*, who miraculously healed *him*, and the priests would then investigate this matter. This would be consistent with *Jesus's* stated mission, to present Himself and *His* kingdom platform to Israel.

It seems this was the interpretation, or at least the application employed by the *healed man*. If the *man healed* from *leprosy* was told to make a testimony to *the priest*, *he* would be expected to make testimony to many others afterward. It is inevitable that the people in his town would know *he* had been *healed*. (And many people did in fact seem to learn of this miraculous healing—v 15.) We can assume *he* complied with *Jesus's* request to show himself to *the priest* and make the offering that Moses commanded.

Again, Christ's instructions gave *the healed man* an opportunity to bear witness to the priests of *Jesus's* power as well as *His* adherence to the Mosaic Law. Leviticus 14:1-32 presents the priestly protocols and the sacrifices to be offered for restoring a *healed man* back into society. *Jesus* might have been illustrating to the priests *His* statement in Matthew 5:17 that *He* had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it.

Among the burnt offerings (Leviticus 14:13), sin offerings (Leviticus 14:13), guilt offerings (Leviticus 14:14), grain offerings (Leviticus 14:20), and wave offerings (Leviticus 14:24), this offering was entirely unique to lepers who were made *clean*. It involved two birds and it is a ritualistic allegory of the Messiah's sacrifice for man's salvation from sin and death. This is the offering that Moses commanded which *Jesus* referenced:

“Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing. Now he shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall go out to the outside of the camp. Thus the priest shall look, and if the infection of leprosy has been healed in the leper, then the priest shall give orders to take two live clean birds and cedar wood and a scarlet string and hyssop for the one who is to be cleansed. The priest shall also give orders to slay the one bird in an earthenware vessel over running water. As for the live bird, he shall take it together with the cedar wood and the scarlet string and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was slain over the running water. He shall then sprinkle seven times the one who is to be cleansed from the leprosy and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the live bird go free over the open field.’”

(Leviticus 14:1-7)

*Leprosy* represents sin and death. The bird placed in earthenware represents God's Incarnation into human flesh. Its slaying represents the Christ's death on a cross. The live bird that is dipped in the blood of the one that was slain represents the Christ's atonement of the sinner. There is the symbol of resurrection and new life when this bird is let go free over the open field.

Later on, when *the priest* performs the guilt offering for the *cleansed* leper, he does something unusual and rather personal in the sacrificial ceremony. He takes the blood of the lamb and puts “it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be *cleansed*, and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot” (Leviticus 14:14). He will also do this with oil (Leviticus 14:17). Touching one’s ear is an intimate act. It is a sign of closeness and affection. It is quite possible that when *Jesus* touched the *man covered with leprosy* to make *him clean*, *He* touched his right ear.

*But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses (v 15).*

It seems clear that the *man healed from leprosy* did spread *the news* far and wide. *He* was also likely aided in *his* proclamations by the other eye-witnesses that saw the healing take place. Mark’s Gospel account confirms the leper’s role in the spreading of *the news* (Mark 1:45).

*Jesus* stated *His* plan for spreading *His* kingdom platform in Luke 4:43:

“But He said to them, ‘I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.’”

However, after *the news* spread that *He healed* the leper, *Jesus* had to remain in unpopulated areas due to the *crowds*. The phrasing from Mark 1:45, “But he went out and began to proclaim it freely,” might indicate that the leper’s witness went beyond what *Jesus* preferred. This resulted in *Jesus* having to adjust *His* campaign to avoid the hindrance of massive *crowds*.

The symbolism of *leprosy* as something with spiritual connections was possibly broadly understood. This could account for the additional surge in *crowds* after word spread of this miracle.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>12</sup> While He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man covered with leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” <sup>13</sup> And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately the leprosy left him. <sup>14</sup> And He ordered him to tell no one, “But go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” <sup>15</sup> But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses.**