

# Luke 5:12-26

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[ 0 : 00 ] We turn up Luke chapter 5 and we'll pick things up with a reading began in verse 12.! It feels in some ways like a lifetime ago, but when we hear words again like lateral flow and lockdown and quarantine, we are quickly transported back to a time that few of us will forget.

And our memories of it all will be different, of course, depending on our experience. But one of the things that the whole COVID thing did for us was make us think in terms of clean and unclean. And we might not have been thinking that at the time. We might not have used that precise language. But that was actually the way that we were being trained to think by all of the rhetoric and the language and the terminology.

If your lateral flow test was clear, you were free to engage in society, albeit at a distance of two meters, and you were clean.

You were able to function and you were accepted and there were no problems. If those dreaded lines came up, however, you had to lock yourself away. You had to quarantine. And you had to let everybody know that you were to be avoided.

[ 1 : 24 ] You were, well, unclean. Those are the categories that we were being made to think of. And then, of course, there was the moral version of the same distinction. COVID was so divisive that people took sides about how the whole thing was being handled.

And if you were with me and my interpretation of it all, well, then you were accepted. But if you took another view, well, then you were not accepted.

In fact, you were an outcast and you were treated as such. That's the way we behaved. That's the way the rhetoric functioned. And that's how we lived our lives, clean and unclean.

So when we come to Luke 5 this evening in this section that was read for us, the categories that are at play there are not as far away from our experience as we might think.

We were introduced to two men who were considered unclean. And they were outcasts as a result. And for them, the exclusion was cultural, yes. But it was also tied up with the law of God.

[ 2 : 25 ] So there were theological reasons for thinking of them in this way. Indeed, the men themselves would have thought this about themselves. But as we saw last week, everything changes when they come face to face with Jesus.

In fact, when they come face to face with Jesus, these categories are turned on their head. The first man, do you see him? Verse 12, he's a leper. Leprosy was a dreadful skin disease with no cure. Lepers became disfigured. And because it was highly infectious, they had to live in isolation. And this wasn't just a matter of public health. It wasn't just hands, face, space.

But it meant religious exclusion. Leviticus 13.45 says that the leperous person had to call out when they walked anywhere. They walked around. They had to call out, unclean, unclean, wherever they went.

Imagine what that was like when you walked down the street. If you saw another person, you had to warn them that you were unclean. And they had to live outside the towns and cities as a result. Lepers weren't just sick.

[ 3 : 31 ] They lost their family. They lost their friends. They lost their livelihood. They were literally outcasts. The second guy, verse 18, he's a paralytic.

Now, because of his condition, he was paralyzed. Get around the place. Because of that, he was unable to make the sacrifices that were required by God. So he was a religious outsider as well. His disability also meant that he couldn't work. He was dependent on others. There was little or no social safety net in those days. And so begging was often how people like him got by. It was a meager, dispiriting, dehumanizing existence.

But both of these men are given to us in Luke chapter 5 to show that they are cultural and religious outsiders. They were rejected. They were shunned. And then they meet Jesus.

Now, before we walk through the story, it's important that we don't think about these two men at arm's length. Now, you may not have leprosy. That's unlikely.

[ 4 : 35 ] You may not be paralyzed. But these two men are given to us here to give us a picture of the human condition. They show us physically what is true of us all spiritually.

We see in them what sin, the human condition, does to us. It defaces us. It dehumanizes us. It corrodes us from the inside. Sin cuts us off from God and it cuts us off from other people and leaves us spiritually unclean.

So, as one commentator has said, the leprous man gives us, quote, outward and visible sign of innermost spiritual corruption. When we look at them, we're supposed to see something of a mirror to our spiritual condition.

Their physical condition reflects back to us what humanity is like spiritually. Corroded on the inside. Cut off from God and from others. Dehumanized because of our condition.

And no matter, this is the truth, no matter how hard we might try to clean ourselves up to do something about this situation ourselves, we can never manage to do it. That's what we see in the second man.

[ 5 : 44 ] Helpless. That's what sin does to us. We are enslaved, as it were, helpless and incapable of coming to God in and of ourselves. And so, we're stuck in our guilt with no hope of finding forgiveness.

Until we come face to face with Jesus. And when we come face to face with Jesus in that condition, everything changes. And the first thing I want us to see, the first reason why everything changes is, number one, because of Jesus' willingness to cleanse.

His willingness to cleanse. Verses 12 to 16. Leprosy was never okay. You couldn't just have a touch of leprosy.

You never heard somebody say, oh, I had one of those awful 24-hour leprosy bugs. Or, if you quarantined for the right length of time, you weren't then able to get back in the game.

Leprosy was dreadful. But even still, Luke presents this man as having a seriously bad case of it. Look at verse 12. While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.

[ 6 : 57 ] His whole body had been affected by this awful condition. He would have been crying out, unclean, unclean, everywhere he went. And probably, given the advanced state of his illness, he would have looked and sounded and even probably smelled awful.

Rotting flesh stinks. Full of leprosy. Again, the physical embodiment of the spiritual reality of all of us.

However, he believes that Jesus can heal him. And he throws himself at the Messiah's feet. Verse 12. When he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and he begged him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.

He knows that he just needs Jesus to be willing to say the word and he will be done with his miserable, painful, and broken past. And then he feels the touch of Jesus' hand.

And he hears what must have been the sweetest words to ever hit his eardrums. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I will be clean.

[ 8 : 06 ] And in an instant, the man's skin is restored.

There's an old boy that I see around Shepherd's Bush where I live regularly. He usually has a can that peeks out of his inside pocket. He's often unsteady on his feet.

His face is blue and swollen and has lumpy growths all over it. It is terribly disfigured through decades of drinking.

It's actually quite shocking to see. It's a really pronounced case of being disfigured by this abuse.

When I see him, a host of things go through my mind, of course, but I imagine this leper comes to Jesus.

And I imagine in an instant, Jesus touching this man's face and his skin being renewed like a baby's. Smooth, soft, unblemished. That's what Jesus does to this leper.

[ 9 : 17 ] All of his disfigurement, all of the corrosive effects of this leprosy, gone in an instant with a word and a touch.

And don't miss that point. Don't miss that Jesus puts his hand on this man. No one has touched this man for years. What must that be like?

We got a sense of that, didn't we, during COVID, that distance that we were kept at and how dehumanizing it was. Imagine nobody touching your skin for years.

And people would have looked at this man and turned their face away. No one would have touched him. No one would have placed their hand on his infectious and defiled body.

And Jesus touches him. Skin on skin. Skin on skin. Skin on skin. The question is, why did he do this? Because we know that Jesus could heal with a word.

[10:20] We know that Jesus didn't need to touch the man and risk becoming defiled himself. So why did he do that? Why did he reach out and touch him? Well, here's the reason. Because in his willingness to cleanse the unclean, he shows compassion and he draws near.

He is restoring a relationship as much as he is healing a sickness. And he is bringing that man back into the people of God.

That's actually, you know, what the whole doctrine of the incarnation is all about. God takes on human flesh in order to identify with us. And here, rather than Jesus becoming unclean and defiled, can you see how the contagion, as it were, goes the other way?

Jesus isn't defiled. Rather, the leprous man is cleansed. This is a beautiful picture. Remember, we're looking at the physical and we're understanding it in the context of the spiritual.

This is a beautiful picture of the exchange that happens when we put our faith in the Lord Jesus.

Here's what John Calvin says. It's a long quote. Bear with me. There is such purity in Christ that he absorbs all uncleanness and pollution.

[11:32] He does not contaminate himself by touching the leper, nor does he transgress the law. He stays whole, clears all our dirt away, and pours upon us his holiness.

Now, while he could heal the leper by his word alone, he adds the contact of his hand to show his feeling of compassion. No wonder, since he willed to put on our flesh in order that he might cleanse us from all our sins.

Here is a thing which we pass over without much impression at an idle reading, but must certainly ponder with much awe when we take it properly. That the Son of God, so far from abhorring contact with the leper, actually stretched out his hand to touch his uncleanness.

End quote. Not only is this man brought back into relationship with God, but he can be reintegrated into society as well.

That's why Jesus sends him to find a priest. Look at verse 14. He charged him to tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing as Moses commanded for a proof to them. According to the Old Testament cleansing regulations, the man had to get a priest to verify that he'd been cleansed.

[12:46] And once that priest had confirmed that he was clean and he'd done the sacrifices, he'd offered the sacrifices of Leviticus 14, he could rejoin the covenant community.

What that would do would provide a testimony to the priests and to the community of God's people that the Messiah was in their midst. That the one who had been promised from long ago was in their midst and he was willing to cleanse the unclean.

Now that would have been exciting news and understandably people hear it and then crowds begin to flock to Jesus for healing. That's what's going on. But the obvious question for us, the obvious question for you this evening is this.

Have you come to Jesus and experienced this cleansing power? All that cuts you off from God is washed away in Jesus. Indeed, the cleansing is so deep that the Bible describes us as new creations when we put our faith in him.

We have been made new. The old, it's gone. The old that is defiled and unclean and cut off from God is gone. The new has come. All of the sin that pollutes your life, all of it, the things that you've said and done that linger long after the event, leaving you feeling dirty.

[14:04] What others say, whatever they say, and whatever you think of yourself, I want you to know that there is cleansing in Christ and he is willing.

If you haven't received this cleansing, what's stopping you? What's keeping you back from such an amazing gift? Jesus is willing to give you total cleansing.

Every sin that you've ever committed washed away. Don't let anything get between you and coming to him. We care about this so much. That's why we're running this Hope Explored course.

We're running this to help you look carefully at the person of Jesus, to hear what he says, and to more importantly bring your questions to him and hear what he has to say to you.

The one who offers this cleansing, come along, bring your questions. Pick up one of these cards, come and talk to me afterwards. The cards are at the welcome desk. We'd love you to come and explore further.

[15:06] And if you have come for cleansing, one of the temptations that we feel, even as followers of Jesus, is that past sin, our inability to move beyond besetting sins, we find ourselves thinking negatively and we think to ourselves, well, have I really been cleansed?

Well, let those few words sink into your heart again. I will, Jesus says, be clean. In Christ, all of your defilement, all of your disgrace, your deepest stains have been washed away.

So don't hold on to them. Don't allow them to define you. Don't allow them to hold you back. You are clean. We sing it from time to time.

He is willing. He is willing. He is willing. Doubt no more. You are clean. That's our first point. We see Jesus' willingness to cleanse.

The second is this. We see also the authority to forgive and that's the second section in 17 to 26.

The authority to forgive. The way that Luke sets up the events in these verses is important.

[16:22] Verse 17, do you see it reads like it was just another day on one of those days as Jesus was teaching. But just as the crowd of people who wanted to follow Jesus was growing, there was another crowd growing as well and this group is who Luke actually is bringing into focus here.

Verse 17, On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

The religious leaders are coming from far and near. Word has got out. They need to check out this man who is making such a fuss and who is gathering such a following. So Jesus is making this statement now.

What he does with the paralytic is making a statement in their view. And so in the power of the Lord, he steps forward. Verse 18, And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus.

But finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. The house was full.

[17:24] The crowd was huge. But both the guy on the mat and his friends knew that if they could get this man to Jesus, that it would change his life. He could be healed of his paralysis.

He could play a part in society again rather than being cut off from it all, rather than being an outcast, he could be back involved in things again. He could come to the temple. He could re-engage with God.

So they were willing to try anything they could to get him to this man, Jesus. And probably on the man's instruction, they decided to get in. They came up to the house. They realized that there was a massive crowd there.

They couldn't get in. And somebody suggested, well, we go up on the roof and drop him down. The house is flat roof. Let's see if we can get access there. And up they go. So scratch, scratch, pull the tiles up, pick the, whatever it is you make a flat roof out of in those days, pick that out of the way. It's going to be dusty and dirty. Bang, bang, cut, cut. And the roof opens up. The people down below, we don't know what they're told, but there would have been dust and dirt and all kinds of things falling.

[18:26] It would have been quite a mess. And before you know it, the man's lowered down and he's sitting at Jesus' feet or lying at Jesus' feet. Very strange.

You all think? We read this and we think, oh yeah, it's the story of the paralyzed man being lowered down in front of Jesus. It's very weird indeed. Imagine how he felt lying there.

The room is absolutely full of people. Let's say all these people, really tight room, and we see a hole in the roof and the light comes in. The dust falls down. People are moving out of the way and all that kind of stuff.

And this poor bloke's on the floor looking up. Hi there. It's just me or something like that. Very weird. But the oddness doesn't stop there.

The oddness doesn't stop just in the fact that he's made a bit of a fuss. He's made quite the entrance to come in and be at Jesus' feet. He came with all of this embarrassment, all of this fuss, hoping that his life would be changed.

[ 19 : 27 ] But look at verse 20. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, man, your sins are forgiven you. Are you joking me? Are you serious?

I've gone through all of this embarrassment for this. What are you doing talking about forgiveness? The problem's my legs. I came in here for healing. Come on. I made a massive fuss.

Don't embarrass me and humiliate me like this. But of course, we know Jesus isn't done.

Remember, it's not the man who is in view here for him.

It is the religious leaders. So verse 21, the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?

And Jesus perceived their thoughts. So they were thinking this. They were doing it in quiet. He perceived their thoughts. He knew what they were thinking.

[ 20 : 26 ] He answered them, why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven you? Or to say, rise up and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He said to the man who is paralyzed, I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home and immediately rose up before them.

It's all very shocking. There are three shocks I want to draw attention to. The first is this, the problem of sin. This guy thinks his biggest problem is his paralysis.

And we would look on as we saw these guys bringing him in and we would look on at that situation and agree, his biggest problem is he can't walk. It's obvious, his legs don't work. That's what needs fixing.

But Jesus bypasses that issue. That's the smaller problem as it happens and puts his finger on the bigger problem. The bigger problem is that this man is a sinner before God and that's what Jesus wants to deal with.

Whatever you think your biggest problem is, whatever you think the world's biggest problem is, the fact that we are sinners against God and the world that he has made is a bigger problem. That's what Jesus is saying.

[ 21 : 35 ] He's shocking us with the reality of that. We would have looked at the man and thought his biggest problem was his legs. It wasn't. There is a bigger problem than every problem that you can put your finger on in the world today and that is the problem of the human heart.

Well, here's the second shock. It's the issue of forgiveness. The moment Jesus mentions sins being forgiven, the Pharisees go ballistic. Now, they don't speak but it's obvious and Jesus knows their minds and they are right.

only God can forgive sins because only God is the one ultimately against whom all of us have sinned. Isn't that what David told us in Psalm 51 when he repented in Psalm 51?

He said, against you, you only, have I sinned, O God. Now, we know he'd sinned terribly against more than one other person but he knew that his sin was ultimately an offense against God and it follows that the only person who has been offended against can extend forgiveness for an offense. No one else can do that. So, the scribes and the Pharisees are right but what they aren't doing is joining the dots. They aren't saying only God can forgive sins.

[ 22 : 41 ] This man must be God. But they're saying only God can do this. This man is a blasphemer and they're outraged. There's another shock to come.

Problem of sin, the issue of forgiveness. The third shock is the authority of Jesus. The authority of this man, Jesus. This is where Jesus has been going from the start. Verse 23, this is something of a conundrum.

Can you see? Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven or to say, rise up and walk? Which is easier to say? It's tricky, isn't it?

Because humanly speaking, it's easier to say, your sins are forgiven because that's an internal thing and it won't be immediately visible but only God could say that and it'd be effective. So, in reality, that's impossible.

It's easy to say but it's impossible. Similarly, rise up and walk. Well, it's easy to say the words but only a miracle will make it possible.

[ 23 : 40 ] The guy gets up immediately and is fully better. Not just anyone can speak a word and have the wasted muscle and the ligaments work again like that. The point is, both of these things are impossible.

No mere man can forgive sins and no mere man can recreate muscle and ligaments from nothing. But Jesus is no mere man, verse 24.

But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He said to the man who was paralyzed, I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home. And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home glorifying God.

Son of Man is Jesus' favorite self-description. He's taking the title used in Daniel of the exalted figure, the exalted divine figure who has all authority and power to rule and who will one day judge the earth.

He's taking that to himself. So do you see what's happening? Do you see what's happening here? In full view of the religious leadership, Jesus has orchestrated a situation where he performs that which is physically impossible in order to demonstrate that he has the authority to do that which is spiritually impossible.

[ 24 : 50 ] physically impossible for any of us, spiritually impossible for anyone and he does them. Jesus is the Son of Man before whom we will all one day stand to give an account for every detail of our lives including all the bad stuff and he has the authority to forgive it all.

The issue with the paralyzed man is demonstrating to us that Jesus has the authority to follow through on what we see with the leper.

There is nothing like the feeling of being forgiven. Guilt is a real killer.

Literally, it is a real killer. It leads thousands of people to suicide every year. As a society, we are spending millions in psychotherapy trying to help us manage those feelings and they won't leave. My uncle died a couple of years ago in his 80s. At the end of his life, some of the more candid conversations that we had, there were things that he had done over half a century before that he couldn't talk about because the guilt never left him.

[ 26 : 14 ] Where can we take this guilt? Our culture will give you waves and waves and waves of options and none of them will work.

There is only one place we can take it and that is to the Lord Jesus. And in this exchange with the paralyzed man, Jesus is saying, look, those guilty feelings actually go deeper than you realize. you feel this way because you are guilty before a holy God but I have the authority to remove that guilt completely, to take it away.

And the unburdening that we experience when we come to Jesus in faith as these men did with their friend, when we bring our sin, he says, I will be clean.

Man, woman, boy, girl, your sins are forgiven you. And in that moment, cultural outcasts are brought in.

[ 27 : 19 ] Religious outcasts, those who are outside the kingdom of God, are welcomed. No one, but no one, is beyond the reach of these promises if they will come. So will you do that?

Jesus here is on his way to his death at the hands of the religious leaders that he is so annoyed. But it is a death that in the purposes of God will be a just punishment for the sin of all who trust him. So the invitation this evening is to come. Come for cleansing. Come for forgiveness. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, come.

Let's pray.