

When I was a young child I remember sitting down at a family meal when the phone rang. My dad went to answer it and we could tell by the way he was speaking that this was an unusual phone call. He seemed to be having great difficulty understanding the person on the other end of the line. Later, when he explained it to us, he said the man on the phone kept repeating the same phrase over and over. “I am Christmas and I want to be with other Christmas.” “I am Christmas and I want to be with other Christmas.” Understandably, this caused by dad to be very confused. One thing you should know, my father is a pastor. And back then we lived in the church parsonage, so our home phone was listed in the phone book along with our church’s posting. As a result, occasionally we would receive random phone calls from people who were trying to call the church in need of assistance. We lived in Denver, CO at the time and so the needs could be quite extensive. My dad thought this was one of those calls, and he was right in a way, but it turned out to be that and so much more.

The man’s name was Lubini Irmah, and he was an adult exchange student from Zaire, Africa attending the engineering college not far from our church. In his halting English, he had been trying to communicate with my father on the phone that he was a Christian and wanted to be with other Christians. It saddened my brothers and I to learn that Christmas was not going to be coming early that year, but it opened an opportunity for our church to meet this young man and ultimately to help support him over the course of that year. Lubini was subsisting on next to nothing. He had received a scholarship which covered his schooling but little else. When the people of our church learned of Lubini’s need they responded. Families agreed to host Lubini for two weeks at a time, including my own. I remember very distinctly the period of time that he came to live with us. It was only 14 days and it was 30 years ago, but it had a tremendous impact on our family. The things that might have divided us, the language barrier, the differences in our skin color, the disparity between our financial positions, and the dissimilarity in our two cultures, melted away. No, that’s not quite right. It’s not that these differences faded, it’s that we were able to embrace the disparity. We began to appreciate the variation.

This didn’t come without some difficulty. Like the time Lubini nearly lost his fingers trying to pull leftover scraps of food out of the drain while my mom was running the garbage disposal. Fortunately she shut it off in time and she tried to explain what she was doing. After listening to her Lubini responded in disbelief, “You Americans live like kings. You live like kings.” That time with Lubini all those years ago was a gift for my family. It was a formative experience. All those years ago and I have not forgotten.

When God's grace has found a home in your heart, it prompts behavior and choices that are sometimes radically countercultural. I'm not trying to suggest that hosting a man from Africa for a couple weeks qualifies as radical, but it certainly made an impression on me.

We're in the middle of a series called, A Questionable Life and at the heart of these messages is the question, "Now that the gospel is going to work in us, how does the gospel work its way out through us?" So we been learning that it's expressed in the way that we listen, and the way that we show hospitality and through our generosity. Today we're going to examine the gospel implications on how we view other people. How does the grace of Christ at work in our hearts affect the way we view people, regardless of their skin color, gender, socio-economic condition, sexual orientation or political persuasion? If you are here this morning simply because you're curious about what it means to be a Christian or because you are investigating I'm glad you're here. I hope this affords you an inside view on how Christ would have his followers live. And what better place to look than by examining the example of Jesus' own life? Let's look at Mark 1:40-45 together.

***40** A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean," he said.*

***41** Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" **42** Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed.*

***43** Then Jesus sent him on his way with a stern warning: **44** "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."*

***45** But the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened. As a result, large crowds soon surrounded Jesus, and he couldn't publicly enter a town anywhere. He had to stay out in the secluded places, but people from everywhere kept coming to him.*

Let's start with this, a Jesus that you create- a Jesus of your own design- can't contradict you, can't challenge you, can't help you & can't change you. If you're going to have a Jesus that really helps you or changes you he cannot be one that you've shaped according your own desires of what you'd like him to be. The gospels of Matthew Mark Luke & John are eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus. They were written down during the period of time when those who had actually witnessed Jesus life and heard him teach personally, were dying off. They were recorded so that we could have access to the real Jesus. Here in the first chapter of Mark's gospel we begin to see that Jesus confounds our expectations.

The thing we learn in this passage is the extravagant way Jesus pours out his love to everyone, indiscriminately and without prejudice. Just for some context, in Luke's gospel account, in chapter 4, which is a parallel passage to this section from Mark 1, we're told that Jesus went out to pray and the disciples came out to get him, and Luke adds that they urged him not to leave them. The people of the area were asking for two things. "Stay here," they said. "Don't leave us." And then, "Meet our needs." But Jesus gets up after praying and says, "No, I have to keep moving. I have to go to everyone else too." While we tend to relish the exclusive company of our friends and family, Jesus extended himself to outsiders and to strangers. Never was this more evident than when he encounters this man with leprosy.

Leprosy in those days was not by any means just a disease. It was a total condition: physical, social and spiritual. Physically, of course, to be a leper meant that your body was falling apart. (Leprosy. I'm not half the man I used to be. All my skin is falling off of me. Oh it's all because of leprosy.) That's terrible, but leprosy was no joke. It was a painful condition of the skin that caused sores and severe nerve damage in ones arms and legs. To have leprosy was to live in physical misery, but that's not where the suffering ended. Socially, lepers were pariahs. They were contagious, so lepers were not allowed to get anywhere near the inhabited places. You had to stay out in lonely places, removed from society and family and friends. They had to live without touch; without physical affection. They experienced absolute isolation from human community. If they even came near an inhabited place or if they saw someone coming close they had to yell out, "Unclean! Unclean!" They were cut off socially. They were in physical pain, and they were cut off spiritually.

In that day leprosy was viewed as a curse by God, but regardless, because of the contagiousness of the disease, lepers were barred from worship. They were excluded from the presence of God. There were a number of social rules and restrictions regarding lepers. Not only did these rules punish lepers if they came into inhabited places, but you were punished if you came near a leper. Here's an excerpt from one of the rabbinical writings of that time: "If a leper stands under a tree and a clean man passes by under that tree the later becomes unclean." In other words, if there's a leper under a tree and a man without leprosy doesn't touch the leper but simply goes under the shadow of the leaves of that tree the person becomes unclean. Which means you now participate for a period of time in ceremonial uncleanness. You now can't go to worship and you have to stay away from other people. It was a way of not only punishing lepers who came near us, but us for coming near lepers.

Here in this passage, the leper's needs are many. They aren't restricted to his physical condition. He desires not only for his health to be restored, but for his social and spiritual condition to be healed as well. We know this because of the way he speaks to Jesus. If he had been a Greek or Roman leper he would have stopped when he said, "If you are willing you can heal me." But that's not what he says. He says, "If you are willing you can heal me and make me clean." That meant clean before God, clean before his community and clean physically. This man knew that he needed it all and Jesus gives it to him. Jesus reaches out and touches him.

Does Jesus need to touch him in order to heal him? No, because we know Jesus can heal with a word or with a thought. So Jesus doesn't reach out to touch this man because his body needs it, he touches him because his soul it. Jesus does it simply out of love. He's not ignoring the man's soul, he's touching a man who is absolutely starved for love and so in reaching out, Jesus says, "I'm with you." He's responding to the entirety of this man's need and if you want to know why, it's written for us in the text. Here's the motivation: Jesus was moved with compassion. That means, literally, that he was filled from the depths of his being with love for this man. If you love someone you meet all the needs you see. There's no debate about ideology (evangelism vs. social justice), when you're standing in front of a person in need and compassion has filled your heart. Jesus simply meets the need that he sees. That's what he does.

Two questions for us, first for all of us collectively: What kind of church would we have to be if we're going to minister the way Jesus does?

Author and pastor, Tim Keller from Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC describes where churches typically fall on this spectrum. He alludes to churches at one end of the spectrum as sectarian fundamentalist separatist institutions, and at the other end the mainline mainstream religious institutions. In Keller's view, the sectarian, legalistic churches put a lot of emphasis on conversion, because they want to persuade outsiders to become insiders. But these churches put almost no emphasis on pouring yourself out to meet the social and physical and economic needs of their cities, regardless of what people believe. Do you know why? Keller says it's because Legalism does not create an inner soul exploding with love, knowing that we are sinners saved by grace. Legalism makes a person believe that 'I'm a good person and that's why God loves me. Out there is nothing but the bad.' On the other end of the spectrum, in mainline religious institutions, the emphasis there is placed on doing good; on helping people. But, in Keller's view, out on the far end of that spectrum is a lack of courage to call people to repentance. Churches on that end would never tell anyone that they were lost because of their sin. So as a result they motivate people to do good, but they're not exploding with love either, because that's what conversion produces.

The gospel; the good news of what God has done for us in Christ, produces people who don't despise the world or reflect the world, but they love the world while remaining distinctive in it. Jesus, as utterly different from the world as he was, died for his enemies. He asked God to forgive them for they did not know what they were doing.

That's the reason why any church that is actually following Jesus is not going to be able to make an either/or choice when it comes to conversion or social justice. In fact, in some ways, a church that is following Jesus will exceed evangelistically the ability of a legalistic church because of the attractiveness of their care and concern for people's needs. More will come to faith. But on the other hand, a church that is following Jesus will exceed the social justice of the liberal mainline institutions, because of the power of Christ at work in the hearts of people who have repented of sin and put their faith in Him and Him alone. Jesus produces a church that is balanced in the way it responds to the physical, emotional, social, economic and spiritual needs of people. Can we be that kind of church?

The second question I want to ask is personal. Are you willing to extend your hand to those in need and in distress? Are you willing to allow the differences that normally divide you from others (their race, class, language, economic situation, political persuasion and on and on) are you willing to allow those things to fall by the wayside so that you can connect? Are you willing to see others the way God sees them?

Do you see Jesus touching this leper? In Jesus we see many virtues combined that are never combined in the same way anywhere else. We see tenderness without weakness. Strength without harshness. Humility without uncertainty. We see unbending conviction and yet complete and utter approachability. We see power without the slightest insensitivity. Passion without the slightest prejudice. Integrity without rigidity. Never unthinking, never a false word, never a misstep. What is that? Absolute beauty. In Jesus Christ you are looking at God through a human nature but Paul has the audacity to say that can be formed in you and me. Here in Mark's gospel, Jesus asks us to follow him. We are to become like him.

Now you say, 'How in the world could this sort of character be reproduced in me?' The answer is right here in our text. If you offer yourself unconditionally to Christ, you will see him offer unconditional love in return and that will change you.

What does this leper do? He gets down on his knees in front of Jesus and says, 'If you are willing you can heal me and make me clean.' Do you realize what a mad scramble for life this was?

Lepers were not allowed to come into the inhabited places. Maybe Jesus was actually standing alone and there was no one around, but I doubt it. The leper comes to Jesus, approaches a person, bows down on his knees and at that point you realize he is breaking all the codes and he is really at Jesus' mercy. Because if Jesus doesn't say something right away- if Jesus doesn't reach out and do something- this man might just be beaten to death. Just by coming to Jesus he has put himself at Jesus' mercy. It's scandalous what he's doing. But I think it's even more outrageous when he speaks. He says, 'If you are willing you can heal me and make me clean.' Notice he does not say, 'You have to do this.' 'You have to make me clean! I've risked everything to come to you.'

With these words he's saying, 'I trust you, Jesus. I've thrown myself at your feet and on your mercy, but I will not tell you what I need. You do what you see fit.' This man has dropped all conditions. He has placed himself unconditionally at Jesus' service. Now, that's half way, but we can't stop there, because if we did that would lead us to legalism. Here's the other thing that will change us, when we spend our lives gazing at and seeing Jesus' offer of unconditional love.

What the leper does in this text is amazing, but what Jesus does is even more remarkable. Or maybe it's what Jesus doesn't do that's so amazing. Throughout all history we have religion. And religion says you have to work very, very hard; you have to be very, very good and very pure if you're going to get to heaven. And so, if you're going to get to heaven you have to stay away from the soiled, stay away from the tainted, stay away from the stained. Throughout history whenever clean and unclean got together the clean became unclean. But suddenly, Jesus touches the leper. He tells him to go and make sure to follow through with all the ceremonial offerings, which means he needs to go see a priest who can certify that he has been healed so that he can rejoin society. Think about this, for a moment. Jesus has just touched a man with leprosy and sends him off to perform the necessary steps, but he himself doesn't follow through with any of them. By every regulation he should now go and do all the necessary washings to become clean but he doesn't. Do you know what's happening here? For the first time in history clean and unclean have come together and the unclean has become clean.

By not performing any of the required steps himself, Jesus is saying, 'I am cleanliness.' Do you understand what this means? Do you? It means that I don't care who you are. I don't care what you've done. I don't care how far astray you think you've gotten. I don't care what's been done to you. I don't care how many others have rejected you. I don't care inadequate you feel or how ashamed you are. I don't care what you've done. When you receive Jesus' offer of unconditional love you are made clean. He is cleanliness itself. Through him you can come into the presence of God. Through Jesus anyone can come into the presence of God.

Notice what happens after he heals the leper. He instructs the man not to tell anybody what has happened. Instead, the man does exactly what Jesus has told him not to do. As a result, the leper and Jesus exchanged places. Because of what this man does by disobeying Jesus' instructions, he gets to be in the city, and Jesus can no longer be in the city but has to go out into the lonely places. Do you know what that is? It's a picture of the end of Jesus' life. Because at the end of Jesus' life he is crucified outside the gate, out on the garbage heap. He is taken out to the place of the lepers. He becomes a pariah. He becomes unclean. He is excluded so that we can be taken in. God made him sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is the key to everything. Do you want to have the balance that Jesus' had in the way that he carried himself with others? Do you want to be adept in both word and in deed? Do you want to be fluent in both truth and in love? This is what fills us with compassion. This is what allows our hearts to be transformed so they look like Jesus' heart- when you see his offer of unconditional love.

And so we, who have placed our faith in Christ, must reflect his heart toward others. We actively listen. We show hospitality, inviting people into our homes and out to eat. We give generously. We show no favoritism. This is what we do. In Christ, this is who we are.

"I am Christmas and I want to be with Christmas." I'll never forget that line. "You Americans, you live like kings. You live like kings." I'll never forget that one either. Lubini returned to his family in Africa after he graduated. He had left behind his wife and children to pursue his education. He corresponded frequently with our family and several of the other families from our church. A couple years later we received a call from Lubini. He wanted to let us know that his wife had given birth to a little girl. They named her KarenDeena. Karen is my mother's name & Deena is the name of another woman from our church whose family allowed Lubini to stay with them. He did not want to allow the kindness he had experienced to go unremembered, so Lubini gave his daughter a name that would always remind himself and his family what he had experienced.