

Luke 5,12-16

Sermon: **Are you different from the rest?**

2023.

written by: Danijel Dragaš



LEPER'S LAMENT

1. (Luke 5:12) "And while he was in one of the towns, there was a man covered with leprosy! When he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him: 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.'"

1.1. "While he was in one of the towns." Luke probably does not know the name of the town where this event takes place. As a writer, he wants to emphasize that the event itself is more important than the exact name of the town. Likewise, as a historian, he does not want to invent names of towns if he is not sure he knows them. We see from this that Luke is a man of integrity—he does not allow his title as a doctor or the intelligence he certainly possesses to dictate the way he writes biblical events. In other words: "I want to appear smart at all costs" is not in Luke's mind as he writes this for future readers.

1.2. Further in the text we read: "There came a man full of leprosy." The text clearly states that the man was "full" of leprosy. This is not a benign skin disease, like psoriasis. Though not pleasant to look at, or to have, psoriasis is not deadly. In this case, the disease this man carries is unfortunately malignant in nature, which means it is fatal.

1.3. Let us go step by step: how was it determined in Jesus' time whether someone had a benign or a malignant disease? If a person noticed changes on his skin, he had to present himself to a priest. The priest would determine, based on the symptoms, what kind of disease it was. After the diagnosis, the person had to undergo cleansing and be separated from other people (isolated). After some time, the person would again appear before the priest, and the priest would then decide whether the disease had advanced or receded. If the disease had advanced, the person would be declared unclean.

1.4. What did it mean to be unclean in the Jewish culture of that time? A man who was declared unclean by a priest was no longer allowed to take part in the religious practices of Judaism. If we

know even a little about Jewish culture, which then dominated, that decision (declaring one unclean) carried terrifying consequences for that person. He or she could no longer be part of the Jewish community, could not live in inhabited places, and had to live outside the town, far away from their fellow countrymen. If a man with leprosy went into town to buy provisions, he had to shout at the top of his voice: "Unclean, unclean!" Others would move away from him as if fleeing from death, looking at him with disgust and fear of being infected. If anyone happened to brush against him, they had to report it immediately to the religious leaders, who would decide how many days the person touched by the leper had to be isolated. Even his own household members were not allowed to have contact with him. All the clothes he was wearing at that moment had to be washed or burned. For a Jew, that was an inconvenience they did not want, and so people in the community were merciless toward those with leprosy, insulting them, driving them away, and calling them cursed. A leper was the outcast of all outcasts.

1.5. In our modern age, doctors have concluded that it is not the disease itself that destroys the spiritual condition of a person with leprosy, but his complete isolation and rejection by other people. That is why it is not surprising that many lepers, sadly, commit suicide. And it is exactly such a man that Jesus encounters in the event before us.

LET YOUR WILL BE DONE

2. We read that this man: "fell on his face and begged him." Here we see an act of humility on the part of this man. When he humbled himself before Jesus, he begged him: "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean!" In the words of this man we see that he does not doubt what Jesus can do. He does not say: "Show me so that I may believe in you." He already believes that Jesus can do it.

2.1. If we look at this statement from a theological perspective—and by that I mean this: we all pray in a similar way, the way we have been taught in our communities and churches. We pray to God that, if our healing is in line with his purposes, then let it be so. We pray to God to accept his will whatever it may be. In our prayer we end by saying: "*Let your will be done, my Father!*" And our theological perspective agrees with the words this man spoke to Jesus: "*If you are willing, you can make me clean!*" In other words: "*Jesus, if it is in line with your purposes to heal me, then in my humility I beg you to do so. And if it is not, I accept that.*" And it is possible that this is exactly what is happening here. If Jesus' intent was to come to earth to prove that he is God, then this man's statement proves that he believes Jesus is God, the one from whom he asks and begs—in the same way he always did with Yahweh.

2.2. But from previous events we can conclude that Jesus did not come to earth as God, but he came as a man who wants to teach another man how God is truly to be loved, worshiped, exalted, and glorified. Likewise, Jesus came to prove that he is the chosen Messiah about whom the prophets spoke throughout history. That is why Jesus came, I believe, and that is how we should look at this event: this man does not see Jesus as God; he sees before him the Messiah, his future King who is a man. A unique man sent from God himself, but a man nonetheless.

2.3. Let us remember who it is that speaks to Jesus here. This man is completely rejected and isolated from his people; no one comes to visit him. The religious system has declared him unclean, and whoever touched this man would also be declared unclean. For most, that would bring an

inconvenience they did not want—they would have to go into isolation, could not take part in religious practices for some time, their work would be put on hold, household income would shrink. All of these were inconveniences a person had to endure if touched by a man with leprosy. And that was liturgically correct: according to the Law of Moses¹ they had to go through that process. But that did not make them outcasts forever—they were “temporarily isolated.” On the other hand, this man was “permanently cast out” from his community. None of his people wanted to have anything to do with him.

2.4. In a way, this shows their mercilessness toward another human being. They were not willing to sacrifice their own freedom just to show mercy to a man who desperately needed it. They did not want to bring him food, talk to him, help him not feel alone in all of this. Instead, they hurled insults and drove him away. Yet they should have done differently—Moses’ moral law² required it of them.

— I believe I said this in previous sermons, but it is worth repeating: although ceremonial law was of great importance in Jewish culture at that time, in the eyes of Yahweh it was never as important as the moral law. —

2.5. That is why I said above that in a way the life of the leper was a testimony to them of how hard their hearts actually were toward the moral law of God.

ARE YOU DIFFERENT FROM THE REST?

3. Let us return to the event: when this man says to Jesus: *“If you are willing, you can make me clean,”* I believe he meant this: *“No one will have anything to do with me. I am alone and rejected. Everyone has abandoned me—the priests, the teachers, the community, the family (we do not see this in the biblical account, but it is very possible that even his family abandoned him). Will you reject me too? I know you can heal me—of that I have no doubt. But are you willing to have anything to do with someone like me? No one else is. Are you different from the rest?”* And what Jesus does here is so deep, so powerful, so heart-wrenching that those who witnessed it must have been left stunned, speechless, and marked by it for the rest of their lives.

3.1. **(Luke 5:13)** *“Jesus reached out his hand and touched him, saying: ‘I am willing. Be clean!’ And immediately the leprosy left him.”*

3.2. When Jesus said to this man: *“I am willing. Be clean!”* he showed his people that God loves those whom no one else loves. For Jesus, it was no problem to engage with outcasts. While the priesthood taught others that if you had leprosy like this man, you were being punished by God for mortal sin—and therefore no one should have anything to do with you—Jesus does the opposite of the oral tradition of that time. He wants his disciples, through this event, to see that he desires to engage with such people, and that they are not cursed by God because of mortal sin.

¹ Leviticus 13:45-46; Leviticus 5:3

² Leviticus 19: 18.34; Deuteronomy 15:7-8; Exodus 22:21-23; Hosea 6:6

3.3. I believe one of God's purposes, as the Author of this reality, was surely to use this man's role as a leper to reveal both the mercilessness of the human heart when faced with someone like him, and the true face of religion—of oral tradition of that time.

3.4. The text tells us that when Jesus said he would cleanse him, he also "touched" him. What did Jesus want his disciples to understand through that act? Jesus had no issue going through the ritual process required by the Law of Moses. Mercy toward another human being must outweigh our selfishness. If that means being declared unclean just for showing compassion, then so be it. That is what Jesus wanted to show his disciples. He knew what that touch meant to the man. He knew that now this man knew the Messiah before him loved him—and that meant his God, Yahweh, loved him too. I repeat: an unbelievably deep and powerful act from our Lord. Those who witnessed it—and we who read it today—should be brought to shame, repentance, and, finally, awe before the One we call our Savior.

THE DUTY OF THE PRIEST

4. (Luke 5:14) *"Then Jesus ordered him: 'Tell no one, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'"*

4.1. We read that the leprosy immediately left him. After it did, Jesus told him not to speak of what had happened, but to go to the priest and, according to the requirements of the Law of Moses³, present the appropriate sacrifice as an offering of gratitude to God who had healed him.

4.2. Why does Jesus forbid him from telling anyone? We know from other accounts that he sometimes did the same. But in this particular event, what was Jesus' intent in saying this to the man? As we study the Gospels, we see that Jesus had no intention of hiding who he was. On the contrary—he declared it openly: the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah.

4.3. I believe Jesus' intent here was this: *"Before you announce to everyone what God has done in your life, go to the priest—do this properly."* When someone was miraculously healed, his duty was to report it to the priests in the Temple. They had to record it in their books so that the event—the miracle—was confirmed and testified to by the highest authority of their faith. Once a priest had written it down, no one could deny that a miracle had taken place, one that had come from God himself. And that is what Jesus wanted to achieve here. He wanted there to be written proof that the Messiah now walked among them, and his name was Jesus. And how could he be confirmed as Messiah? By the fact that within the Jewish community miracles were happening that only God could do. Through those miracles, God was proving to his people that Jesus was the Messiah he had sent.

4.4. The man who had been leprous surely told the chief leaders who it was that had done this for him. They, according to the Law of Moses, had to record it in their books. After that, the man was free to tell anyone—and surely he did. But if he had not first gone to the priests, and had only spoken of it wherever he went, in the eyes of the priests that miracle would have been nothing more than hearsay, unconfirmed, and therefore invalid.

³ Leviticus 14:1-32

4.5. Near the end of Jesus' ministry, in John 10:24–25 we read that the chief leaders of the Temple surrounded him and questioned him, asking him to tell them who he was. Jesus answered them: *"I told you, and you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me. You yourselves have recorded in your books the miracles happening around you. Those people told you that I was the one who healed them of all kinds of diseases. I am the Messiah, and my works confirm that the Father sent me, but you still do not believe."* Jesus wanted even the chief leaders to have their eyes opened. If anyone should have believed he was the Messiah, it was the priests. After everything they had seen, after all the miracles they had recorded, they should have believed in Jesus as their Messiah. But tragically, because of hard hearts, most did not. They rejected him—not because they lacked evidence, but because their hearts were hardened against his teaching.

FATHER DAMIEN

5. (Luke 5:15–16) **"Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."**

5.1. This text speaks clearly for itself. Luke likely wants to emphasize just how widely known Jesus' ministry had become at this point. This moment, along with the ones before it, brought his ministry to the very height of fame. Jesus was becoming extremely well known, not only among the Jewish people but also beyond the borders of Israel. People were willing to travel for days just to see and hear him. They brought along their sick so that he might heal them. I believe these events were very stressful for Jesus. And when we read this text, we should remember: here Jesus is not dealing with stress as God, but as one of us—a man. That is precisely what Luke wants to highlight: "how Jesus handled stress." He withdrew to lonely places to pray.

—Remember, I said that prayer is more a matter of need than of religious discipline.—

5.2. To close, I want to tell the story of a man directly connected with the event of the leper. His name was Father Damien, a Catholic priest. He was born the seventh child in a farming family. After finishing elementary school, he worked for four years on the family farm before his father sent him to business school.

5.3. Yet Damien chose the priesthood instead. In 1860 he joined the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Leuven, where he took the religious name Damien. His brother Auguste was also a priest. In 1864 Damien was sent on mission to Hawaii, where he was ordained a priest in Honolulu that same year. Among the native population, leprosy broke out—a disease for which they had no immunity. Because of the spread of the illness, the afflicted were banished to a quarantine colony on the island of Molokai. There they received food but had no medical care. Many turned to alcohol and other vices.

5.4. The local bishop, Louis Désiré Maigret, recognized the urgent need to send a priest among the lepers. Four volunteered. At his own request, Father Damien went first. In 1873 he settled on the island of Molokai, where about 800 lepers—cast out of society—were living. During his ministry there, he gained respect and became known as the "Apostle to the Lepers." He provided medical care, built houses, a hospital, and two orphanages for abandoned children, and cared for their spiritual needs. He started agriculture, founded a school, and transformed a lawless, immoral

community into an ordered society. He also built a church and established the parish of St. Philomena, patron saint of difficult and hopeless situations.

5.5. Eventually, in 1885, Damien himself contracted leprosy—a disease then incurable and fatal. In a letter to his brother, he wrote: *“I have become a leper among the lepers, so that I might give everything to Jesus Christ.”* He died in 1889. In 1936 his remains were returned to Belgium, where he was buried in the monastery at Leuven, which became a place of pilgrimage.

5.6. When we read his life story, it is impossible not to feel admiration and respect for this man. It required immense faith, courage, and selflessness to do what he did. In the end, it cost him his life. The question arises: are we all called to be like Jesus or Father Damien? My short answer would be: both yes and no. Each of us has a role to fulfill in order to glorify our Father. Father Damien had no family—he was single—and surely it was easier for him to make such a decision than for someone with a family. Jesus had divine authority to heal a leper; we do not. If we do not do what Father Damien did, it does not mean we are weaker in faith. The goal of every believer is to recognize the role God has given him or her, to accept it, and to live it out. Father Damien’s decision surely did not come overnight. He deeply believed this was something he had to do. As a man without a family, he had the freedom to make that choice. Of course, that does not diminish his courage—the courage that came from the conviction that Jesus himself loved those whom no one else wanted to love.

5.7. One thing is certain: we are all called not to be like the majority of people, but to love those whom no one else will love. What that looks like in practice, and how we glorify our Father, depends on our circumstances and the opportunities available to us. In this case, where Jesus touched the leper and cleansed him, we are at least called to feed such a person, speak with him, and show him he is not alone. That does not mean we must physically touch him, but we must not allow our discomfort—however it looks—to control us and keep us from showing mercy. We are Christians. We are different from the world. We are lamps shining to display the glory of God, our Father.