



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Jesus Is...Compassionate

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Mark 1:29-45 (ESV)

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

Dear friends,

700 years ago, a man living in a small village in southern England offered this simple, heartfelt prayer:

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits thou hast given me, for all the pains and its insults, which thou hast borne for me, o most merciful redeemer, friend, and brother. May I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.

This prayer of Saint Richard has resonated in the hearts of many a Christian, and it even became the best known song from the musical Godspell, you probably recognized it: *Day by Day*. It's a great little prayer which asks for the most important thing a person can ask for: to know Jesus.

You know, my number one goal as a preacher is to help all people know Jesus; to know Him more clearly and to love Him and follow Him – for there's no greater thing than knowing Jesus Christ. I believe that with all my heart. That's what's behind this "Jesus Is" sermon series that we're doing: to get to know Jesus and have a more intimate relationship with Him each and every day; to discover from scripture new facets of His personality and purpose, and thus grow in our love for Him. So far, we've seen some very interesting pictures of Jesus in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. We've seen He's God's son, that He's strong, that Jesus is calling us, that Jesus is the voice of authority, (God's authority.)

And today we have another picture of Jesus to consider. I refer to it as a "touching picture." Jesus has been in the town of Capernaum, it's the Sabbath, and He's been teaching in a synagogue, He's even cast out a demon and everyone's totally amazed by Him. Well, the service ends and Peter and Andrew, His disciples invite Jesus over to their home, which was nearby. And they got there, and Peter's mother in law was in bed and she's sick – running a fever. That's a deadly thing back in those days; no penicillin, you know. Jesus touched her, healed her, lifted her up, and she served them a meal afterwards. Now at sunset, as they were about to settle in and rest for the evening, they heard noise outside the home when they looked out the window. They couldn't believe it. They saw what looked like the whole community standing out there with sick and demon-possessed relatives and friends, hoping that Jesus would heal and help. Jesus didn't turn them away. He touched and healed people late into the night; He cast

out demons, forbidding them to identify Him in front of the crowd. He probably didn't want any "messiah talk" happening this early before He got His good news preached and the disciples trained.

Well, the next day before dawn, Jesus went off to pray by Himself. Peter and the others came looking for Him, and when they found Him, they said, "Everyone's looking for you, you've got a following, Jesus." And Jesus said, "You know, I came to preach, preach that message to the kingdom, not just be a healer." And He knew there was little indication that these people's interests were any deeper than His healings, and Jesus had come primarily not to heal, but to call people into the kingdom to repent and believe in the good news. And that didn't happen that day in Capernaum, so Jesus, sticking to His agenda, said, "Let's go to other towns and give them a chance to hear my good news." So off they went down the road and suddenly a leper approaches Jesus as they're walking, he falls on his knees and begs for help.

Leprosy was an incurable skin disease considered infectious and communicable; it rendered one's body a mass of ulcers and decay. Fingers would curl and gnarl, blotches of skin would discolor and stink. It could numb the nerve endings and would lead to a loss of fingers and toes. There were not only physical consequences, but social consequences with this disease: lepers were outcasts, considered unclean, a threat to their society. So they had to live apart from their loved ones and their community. They're required to "social distance" 50 feet, 50 paces away from other people. Can you imagine? We complain about six! They couldn't attend synagogue services because of their disease; and because God had afflicted people with leprosy in the Old Testament times as a punishment for their sins, people in Jesus's day tended to look at this leprosy as a punishment from God on these people for some sin they'd done. There was also job loss and therefore no income, so they had to live on charity. They truly were untouchable, a tragic existence. Author Max Lucado gives us an imaginary first person insight into this leper's plight. The leper says, according to Lucado, "What is common to you, I covet: handshakes, warm embraces, a tap on the shoulder to get my attention, a kiss on the lips. Such moments were taken from my world. No one touched me. 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 and lonely.

This afflicted man, seeing Jesus breaks the norms, the social distance rules and humbly approaches Him and kneels before him and begs for help, saying, "If you will, Jesus, you can make me clean. We're told that Jesus was moved with pity, literally meaning compassion, for the man. He first stretched out His hand and He touched him! Of all things, an unclean, contagious leper – Jesus touched him. That was taboo, risky, and made you unclean. He's risking defilement and sickness for the sake of saving this man's life. And then Jesus said, as He's touching him, "I will. Be made clean." And guess what? Jesus was not contaminated. But instead, the leprosy left the man. He was healed. He was clean, restored, rescued from his personal hell. With one touch and a word from Jesus, that man's life was changed forever.

A biblical commentator that I was reading about for this story writes,

His touch seems reckless, because touching the leper should contaminate Jesus medically and spiritually. However, in this case, it is not the leper who is contagious, but Jesus. The leper doesn't transfer his uncleanness to Jesus, but Jesus transmits His wholeness and holiness to the leper and makes him clean medically, spiritually, and socially."

It's quite an insight. Jesus is the contagious one.

And this is not an isolated incident that we've examined here, friend. Elsewhere in Mark's gospel, we find Jesus touching and associating with the unclean in ways that should defile Him. We read a story of a dead little girl that he touched or a hemorrhaging woman or a corpse or gentiles and despised tax collectors. And in each case, Jesus transmits wholeness rather than the other way around. All of this kind of reminds me, I guess, of Bill Gaither's old hymn, *He Touched Me*:

He touched me, He touched me,
And o, the joy that fills my soul,
Something happened and now I know,
He touched me and made me whole.

We need to ask, why did He do that – get close to the uncleaned, the untouchable – why did He bother to heal? We know that it slowed down His ministry of preaching, and perhaps that's why He sternly orders the leper to not tell anyone about His healing. There was the risk of those healings being distractions from the good news He wanted people to hear and act upon with repentance and belief. So why, why, why did He do that? Some point out that He was displaying His power and authority over sickness,

showing signs of the kingdom; and surely that is correct. But I would suggest that we're also seeing a display of divine love and compassion. It says in our story that He was moved with pity, compassion. Behind these miraculous displays of power beats a compassionate heart for people. He cast out demons because they had no right to occupy and spoil lives, and at the heart of this healing, and other healings, was love and compassion.

So I would suggest that we would fill in our "Jesus Is" blank today with the word "compassionate." Jesus is compassionate. He deeply cares about all people: the happy, the sad, the rich, the poor, the old and the young, the healthy and the suffering, even the untouchables and the outcasts, those who are isolated, ignored, ostracized by others, those feeling so alone by and because of others. And listen to this, if you hear nothing else today: Jesus cares about you, too. He sees every one of us as precious individuals created in God's image, in need of His compassion and love in our lives to be complete, to be whole, and to be holy before God.

And personally, this truth thrills me. Let me explain why: because like you, sometimes I hurt, inwardly and outwardly. I need compassion and mercy, I need to touch someone who cares. And Jesus promises to draw near to me as I draw near to Him. "Lo, I am with you always," He says. And life can be really hard and I need someone I know I can call upon to comfort and help – someone who really cares about me. That call for help doesn't fall on deaf ears when it comes to Jesus.

I had a friend who constantly had chronic pain in her life; she's since passed. I remember many times she'd say to me, "I don't know where I'd be without Christ to turn to. That's what gets me through." You see, Jesus had proven to be a compassionate friend to this individual. He wants to be that kind of friend to you, too. And I'm especially glad Jesus is compassionate when I start thinking about my life and how I get so down and dirty with my sinful ways. I am so unclean in God's sight, in need of cleansing and forgiveness; unholy, unworthy to even stand in His presence. My sinfulness makes me unfit for living in a relationship with God. But get this: Jesus, in His compassionate love for this unclean sinner, went to a cross to make me clean and whole and holy in God's sight. He took the punishment for my sin, for your sin, to make me clean before God. He's my compassionate rescuer from sin and death and the power of the devil. I'd be lost without Him.

You know, I find it interesting that Jesus told the leper after the healing to go to the priests and make the appropriate offerings so that he could have a clean bill of health to enter back into society. So in my studies of this, I looked up that offering and ritual, as it's described in Leviticus 14. It involves sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. The blood from that lamb would be sprinkled and smudged on the person bringing the offering by the priest in the temple. They were covered by the blood for cleansing. The same thing has happened to make us clean from sin: the sacrifice of Jesus, who was the lamb of God, suffering and dying to take away our sin and cleanse sinners like you and me. As we place our trust in Him, we're covered by the blood of the lamb in the sight of God – cleansed of our sinfulness.

So that's our good news for today: we have a compassionate savior, Jesus Christ, a friend who won't turn us away when we call upon Him in faith. Thanks be to God for Jesus, our compassionate friend, and savior and Lord. Now, in light of this good news, I thought of a couple of practical applications for us today. First of all, let's draw near to Him every day in prayer, knowing that He will draw near to us because He's compassionate and cares. He died for you and rose for you and is here for you now. Call upon his name. He will answer and draw near. And next, if you're a follower of Jesus, and after you've drawn near to Him, than in grateful response for His grace draw near to others: the excluded looked down upon, the forgotten, the lonely, the ignored, the suffering, and even the difficult people; and pass on this compassionate touch to them. Who knows, you might be the answer to someone's prayer asking for help. As the Bible camp song says, "That's how it is with God's love: once you've experienced it, you spread His love to everyone because you want to pass it on."

Amen.