

Cleansing of the Leper

by Harry Ironside

Harry Ironside's sermon on the cleansing of the leper emphasizes the parallels between leprosy and sin, highlighting Jesus as the only source of true healing and cleansing.

Duration: 40:08

Scripture: Leviticus 14, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 8:1-4, Acts 6:7

Topics: "Healing"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher begins by referencing the Gospel of Matthew chapter 8, specifically the first four verses. He prays for God to open the hearts, understanding, eyes, and ears of the listeners, just as Jesus did for his disciples. The preacher then discusses the significance of the little bird and the blood in the earthen vessel, symbolizing the life-giving Holy Spirit and the sacrifice of Jesus for our salvation. He also mentions Joseph Cook, a preacher and lecturer, who delivered a powerful message using a quote from Shakespeare's Macbeth. The sermon concludes with a reminder of Jesus' resurrection and the hope it brings for eternal life.

Transcript

I'm going to ask your attention tonight to a few verses in the eighth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the Gospel of Matthew, chapter eight, and the first four verses. Our gracious Father and our God, now is the open time book. We lift our hearts again to you, and we pray to you that thou wilt do for us what our blessed Lord did for those disciples on the resurrection evening, when he opened to them the scriptures, and opened their understanding, and opened their hearts, and opened their eyes, and opened their ears.

Willst thou do all this for us, and give us to receive thy truth in good and honest times, as the very word of the living God undertakes for us, as we seek to minister independent from thyself, and in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Matthew eight, verses one to four.

And when he was come down from the mountain, a great multitude followed him, and they came a leper unto him, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt thou canst make me free. And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will, be thou free. And immediately his leprosy immediately was cleared.

And Jesus said unto him, Be thou tell no man, but go thy way unto the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded for a testimony to them. Those of you who are familiar with your Bibles, and I hope you all are, will remember that in the book of Leviticus, which was the priest's guidebook under the old

dispensation, there are two chapters devoted to the detection of, and the detection and cure, cleansing of leprosy. Chapters thirteen and fourteen.

You'll remember that in chapter thirteen we are told how leprosy was to be detected. If a man or a woman had in the skin of their legs a rising or a bright spot that was giving them some trouble, they were to be brought unto the priest, and the priest was to examine them carefully. And if he discerned certain symptoms as indicated in that chapter, then he was pronounced this person or persons to be leprous.

And we read the man in whom the leprosy is, his head shall be bare, his clothes shall be red, he shall have a covering on his upper lip, and he shall cry, unclean, unclean, and without the cap shall his habitation be. It was a terrible affliction. Leprosy, you see, is the awful picture of sin.

Leprosy was the most filthy, the most horrible disease that was known in ancient times, and sin, though we so often treat it lightly, is the filthiest, the vilest thing that has ever intruded into God's universe. We're told that fools make a mock at sin. So, whenever you find anybody who speaks scornfully of what God's word has to say regarding sin, you know exactly what he is.

God says he's a fool. Now, we're not authorized to call people fools ourselves, but when God calls a man a fool, then we need not hesitate to apply that epithet to him. I remember once some years ago, a group of us were going night after night from Oakland to San Francisco on the ferry boat, the whole meetings over in San Francisco, and we had with us a delightful Irish brother who played a concert leader and was a very good tenor singer, and as we went back and forth in the ferry boat, we'd get off to one corner on the deck, and this good brother would lead us in the singing of thoughtful hymns.

And I remember one night as we were singing, a man who was reading a newspaper near us dropped off with great indignation, and just as we finished, he said, who are you people anyway? A pack of fools intruding the religion of a pope who have no interest in it? My Irish friend said, yes, you know, sir, we are fools for Christ's sake. Whose fool are you? And the man turned and fled. He was away down at the other end of the boat in a minute or two.

Well, you know, it's a terrible thing to be one of the devil's fools. Fools make a mock at sin. Sin is a fearful affliction.

One might as well make a mock at a terrible disease like leprosy. You see, leprosy, like sin, was a constitutional disease. A man wasn't a leper because he happened to have an incurable sore here upon his hand or his arm or some other part of his body, or it might be on his head, for we read that if a man had a rising or a bright spot on his forehead or on his bald head, this becoming way of wearing the hair was common in Israel thousands of years ago.

And if a man had a sore, one of these horrible sores in his head, well, it was leprosy there. On the body it was called leprosy of the flesh, and you see it just indicates the two different kinds of sin. We read of the lusts of the flesh and the lusts of the mind.

The lusts of the flesh, of course, include all kinds of fleshly appetites, breaking over from God's host's objection to God's holy law, drunkenness, and lasciviousness, and licentiousness, and other terrible sins. And a great many people, respectable people, look with utter disgust on folks who are given to these sins, but they forget that leprosy of the head was just as terrible as leprosy of the flesh, and that the lusts of the mind are just as wicked in God's sight as the lusts of the flesh. Pride, and arrogance, and conceit, and

unbelief, these things are just as hateful to God as drunkenness, and adultery, and the gluttony, and other vile sins.

They all tell the story that the one guilty of them is a sinner. But I started to say a man was not a leper because he happened to have some of these thorns here or there upon the body or the head. They were there because he was a leper.

The leprosy wrought from within out. It was a constitutional disease, and a man might be a leper for some time, and quite unconscious of it until at last these outward evidences appeared. And so a man is not a sinner because he gets drunk, or because he tells lies, or because he's guilty of some vile form of immorality, or because he's proud, and haughty, and vain, and conceited.

He's not a sinner because of these things, but he is guilty of these things because he's a sinner. Because out of the heart the Lord Jesus tells us to receive evil thoughts, fornication, and adultery, and all these other unholy things that make manifest the fact that one is a sinner. And, you know, leprosy was an absolutely incurable disease.

In our day physicians have discovered a remedy that seems, at least in some instances, to bring about a cure if used in time. But, in Bible times there was no known cure for leprosy. The man who became a leper was accounted a curse of God, and there was absolutely no help for it.

You'll remember it was said that King Uzziah, that because of his pride in attempting to assert the priesthood, had entered the holy place in the temple with a censer in his hand. When the high priest sought to hold him back, that suddenly the leprosy came out on his forehead. You see, that was leprosy of the head, indicating the pride that dominated him, and we're told he dwelt in a several houses a day of his share.

What, mixed with leprosy, there was no cure. Dear friends, there's absolutely no cure for sin so far as man is concerned. No man can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him, nor can any man deliver him from himself from the power of sin.

Sin, so far as man is concerned, is an incurable disease. But, thank God there is a cure. I'll never forget reading long years ago, when they were holding the first World's Fair in Chicago, that they put on what they called there a Parliament of Religion, and they invited the representatives of all the great religious systems of the world to come together to explain their beliefs, to make clear to the people what their creeds were, and so on, and give folk an opportunity to choose between them if they wished.

Well, they came from all over the world. There were Hindus, Swamis in their yellow robes. There were the Chinese followers of Lao Tzu in their priestly garb.

There were the representatives of the Persian apartheid, who held the Zend-e-Vestas, their sacred scriptures. There were Mohammedan Mullahs in their robes, representatives of all the religions under heaven, and there were representatives of the various branches of the Catholic Church Greek Catholics, and Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholics, and Jacobite Catholics, and Monoposite Catholics, and Coptic Catholics. You know, some people imagine the Catholics are all one.

It's only us. We poor Protestants are divided up, but blessed is the dozens of fifteen different Catholic churches are all claiming to come right down from Christ and the Apostles, and they were all there. And here and there could be seen among the multitude representatives of Protestant Christianity, and among

these was Joseph Cook, the celebrated congregational preacher and lecturer of Boston, Massachusetts.

When it came his turn to speak, oh, what a message he gave. This was before that great audience of thousands of people, and he said to them, my friends, I come to you today taking my text from Shakespeare's Macbeth. I draw your attention to the scene where Lady Macbeth, after the murder of Duncan, is trying to wash the blood of the murdered king from her hands, and Shakespeare says, see how she washes that hand.

That was the red, that red right hand. It was the multitude even as he's incarnate, making the green one red. And her husband Macbeth stands by and cries out, oh, damn, ah, will that hand ne'er be clean.

All the perfumes of Arabia could not weaken that little hand. Dr. Cook said, I've listened to the representatives of all the religious systems who are gathered here from the East and the West and the North and the South, and I come to you today and I place Lady Macbeth on my right arm, and her husband on my left, and I walk down the aisle of this grand congress of religions, and I've only one question to put to the representatives of every system here, and my question is this, who will cleanse our red right hand? Who will wash away the guilt of our sins? He said, I listen to all the different representatives here, and I find different ones telling us how we ought to live in the future, and how we should reform our lives and teach to behave better, but I've yet to hear one who can tell us how the sin of our lives is to be cleansed. Who will cleanse our red right hand? Ah, he said, at last I turned back to the one of whom I learned that my mother is mean, and I look up into his face and say, who can cleanse our red right hand? And the answer comes back, the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.

That's the only cure. That's the only way that guilty sinners can be cleansed and made fit for heaven. Well, the thirteenth chapter of Leviticus, I repeat, tells us how to diagnose cases of leprosy, and because the priest has a responsibility of doing this very thing, I'm certain that every priest in Israel who officiated at the temple must have read that chapter over and over and over so as to get all the details of it clearly in his mind.

But the fourteenth chapter told the priest what he was to do when a man was cleansed from the leprosy. You know, I've often wondered whether any priest in Israel ever took the trouble to read that chapter through twice. Undoubtedly, at least at once.

But I fancy he'll be ready to say to himself, well, I don't know why this is in my Bible. Why, it says here that when a man has been cleansed from his leprosy, then the priest is to do certain things for him. And I've never heard of a man who's cleansed from his leprosy.

Lepers are never cleansed. You know that you can go through your Bible from the chapter that tells us of the healing of Miriam in the wilderness to where this passage is not yet coming to you, right on down to the very beginning of the New Testament. And you never read of a leper being cleansed in Israel.

Not once. The Lord Jesus said many lepers were in Israel in the days of the life of the prophet, but to none of them was the life the same but to Nahum and Nathanael. And he was a saint, and this chapter wouldn't apply to him.

But we never have any record of any leper ever being cleansed in fifteen hundred long years. Why on earth did God put that chapter in the Bible? A chapter that manifestly nobody could ever act on, so far as

people could see. A chapter that nobody, that gave instruction which no priest could ever carry out as far as anyone did, and yet there it was in the book.

A dead letter, they might say, but it was part of God's work. And you know, one day a priest was officiating I fancy at the temple. I have to draw a little bit of my imagination here, but I'm sure I'm not going outside of Scripture record.

A priest was officiating at the temple, and a man came to him and said, look, could you come outside? There's a man out here who says he's been cleansed from his leperism, and he's come to offer the sacrifices of Moses the man. And I fancy that priest would say whatever he thought he might. Why, I've been a priest here for years.

I never heard of a man being cleansed from leperism. My father was a priest before me, and he never knew of a man being cleansed from leperism. As far as we can go back into the record, no one has ever heard of a man in Israel being cleansed from leperism.

And you need to tell me that there's a leper who has been healed outside the gates of the temple. Yes, he's there, and he wants you to come and look at him. And I fancy, you know, almost unwillingly, that priest would go up.

Where is this man who says he was cleansed from leprosy? You're the man, so let's have a look at him. And he would examine, according to the 13th chapter of Leviticus, which tells us he knew well. And we have to say, well, I don't see any evidence of leprosy here.

But are you sure? Yes, there were lepers. Well, if I wasn't, somebody made a terrible mistake, and I've suffered awfully from it through the years. I came to this very temple years ago, and I was carefully examined by the priest who pronounced me to be a leper.

And because of that, I've had to dwell in the wilderness apart from my family all these years. I haven't been permitted to visit my loved ones. I haven't been able to come close enough to my wife or my children even to touch their hands.

If they brought their food to me, they placed it on a rock, and then they threw them far off as I came over and picked it up in order to feed upon it. And if anybody drew near, I had to cry out, on tree! On tree! On tree! And oh, how I've suffered in my form. Quite seen as though my very fingers and toes and my feet and my hands were just literally rotting away, and my face has been amass'd of horrid flames and sores.

My whole body has been reaping with this filthy disease. Well, I don't understand it. There's no evidence of it now.

How was it cured? What doctor did you find? What medicine did you take? You ought to make it known to everybody. If you found a cure for leprosy, everyone ought to know it. The Jerusalem Medical Association ought to have all the details so that they can publish it abroad and give everybody the opportunity of getting the remedy.

How were you cured? And I think the man would reply, well, I was up there in Galilee, and I was out for the wayside in the wilderness, and I saw crowds coming down the highway just the other day, and I wondered what was all about, and I shut as near as I felt I dared, and I shouted out, what's this excitement? What's going on? Somebody answered back, Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth is coming this way. And I said,

Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth? Oh, I've heard strange things about him. He's the one I'm told who makes the tongue of the dumb to sing.

He's the one who opens the ears of the deaf. He's the one who opens the eyes of the blind. He's the one who makes the lame man into the heart.

He's the man who they tell me heals all manner of diseases. Surely he could do something for me. Surely my case is not too bad for him.

And I would say, Jesus, sir, I forgot all the prohibitions, you know, and I ran, and I saw in the midst of a crowd, and I fell down at his feet, and I said, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And he put forth his hand and touched me. Touched you? Well, then he became untreated.

Any man who touches a leper is untreated. I bet it didn't work that way. He touched me and said, I will be thou clean.

And in a moment, I felt in my body that I was healed of that awful plague. And the next instant, I looked at my own hand. I could hardly believe it.

Why, there was just a disease of mouths, not a sign of disease upon them. And I knew that I was no longer a leper. And he said to me, now, don't go treasured abroad, but go to the temple, show yourself to the priest, and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded.

So, here I am, and I want you to offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded. And I think I, that priest, that is impudent. He knew what am I to do.

Hey, go and get me my Bible, will you? I don't know what to do for this man. And away they go, and get him the book of Leviticus. And for the first time, he'd read that 14th chapter with real interest.

Now, he had found the case where he was to carry out what was written in it. And you know, from that time on, for three and a half wonderful years, there was perhaps gently a week that went by that somebody didn't come to the temple on the same evening. Someone calling for the priest to examine him, because he'd been claimed to be leprous.

And one time there were nine of them came at one time, all together, nine of them. And I can't use the priest's name for some of that. And he said, you need to tell me that you were all lepers.

Yes, you were all lepers. And in fact, there were ten of us. But the other one, well, he was a Samaritan.

And he wasn't interested in our temple. He was far more interested in the man that healed him. We were all together, and we came to Jesus.

And we asked him to heal us. And he said, go show yourself to the priest. And as we went, we were healed.

There's power in his words to heal and save. And the priest would have to again carry out all that was written in the Fourteenth and Leviticus. Are you surprised that when you turn over to the book of Acts and read of what happened a few years later, after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, we're told, and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Why, you see, they'd had so many wonderful testimonies to the power of Jesus. Well, what were they to do? Well, you have to turn back to that passage in Leviticus. I'd like to read it to you, but my eyes are so thin, I'd only hold things up a bit trying to follow it, so I have to depend on memory.

But you know, we're told that when a man was cleansed, and the leper seemed to behold the priest, and the priest was to come forth and look upon him, and to be proud that he was actually cleansed, then it says, the priest shall take two birds, alive and clean, and cedarwood and scarlet wool and the hyssop, and he shall kill the living bird in an earthen vessel over living water. Then he shall take the other bird, and he shall dip it in the blood of the dead bird, and let them shall sprinkle the blood of the dead bird upon the leper, and let the living bird loose into the open field, and the leper shall be counted as clean. That was his judicial cleansing, to fit him to come back again among the people of God, to go back to his home and dwell with his family too.

And what does it speak of? Oh, it seems to me it's God's beautiful picture of the death and resurrection of his beloved son. Two birds, one of them that had to die, the other soared up and up into the air bearing upon it, through me, the blood of the bird that died. You see, they were identified as it were, one with the other.

It took two birds to illustrate Christ in death and Christ in resurrection. He was delivered for our offenses, he was raised again for our justification. The priest took that little bird, and you know the bird of the heavens just keeps the Christ, the heavenly one, coming down into this world to cleanse poor sinners.

He says he came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance, and the priest put that bird in an earthen vessel, and you know what the earthen vessels speak of. The apostle Paul, when he's talking of believers as carrying the gospel to a lost world, says, we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us. The earthen vessel, you see, refers to our poor, frail humanity, and so the little bird in the earthen vessel spoke of the heavenly one, the blessed eternal son of God, taking our humanity apart from its care, if the human with his being, in other words, becoming a man.

What for? Oh, the bird was put into the earthen vessel to die, and the Lord Jesus became a man to die. To die for you, dear us, says what? For you, that you might not perish, that you might be saved eternally, and have you ever thanked him for doing so? He came from heaven's highest glory down to Calvary's depths of woe to save your guilty soul. The little bird in the earthen vessel, the Christ of God in a human body, in order to die.

You remember the apostle Peter uses that figure when he's speaking of the proper relation of Christian husbands and wives. He says to the husband, giving honor unto the wife, who is the weaker one. I remember some years ago we were at the Bible conference of the Quebec, and there was one brother there who was, oh, he, I suppose he was a Christian.

I hope he's not too bad in our, our, our, but he was one of these hard types of men. He was so hard in his family, and so stern with his wife and his children, but he was very prominent in speaking of the nature. And so we were on that passage, and he looked up and he said, Brother, what do you understand about that? Giving honor to the wife is on the weaker bed.

But I said, Brother, I think it means this, that you should be very considerate of your wife. And when you come home and find she's got a bad headache, you get in and do the dishes for her, and clean things up for her. Well, he said, you think that's what it means? I said, exactly what it means.

Well, he said, I never thought it was anything like that in the Bible. I thought it was trying to find an answer. I said, you see, the body of the wife is spoken of as the weaker bed.

And so the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus, came down from heaven, and he took the earthen vessel of our humanity in order that he might die. And see how exact Scripture is. The priest was to kill the little bird in the earthen vessel over living water.

And living water is God's lovely picture of the life-giving Holy Spirit. And it was in the power of the eternal Spirit that the Lord Jesus offered himself without thought or control for our salvation. He said, the Son of Man is come not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life for ransom for man.

Well, there's good, there's gladness, yes. And he saw the little bird put to death, and he saw the priest carrying out his trust, and then he saw the priest take the living word, and he did to prove it to the living word in the blood of the bird that died. Then he left the earthen vessel, and away he went, up and up until he proved it with holy sight, and it was God's picture of his own blessing Christ.

What did you think tonight? Up from the grave he arose with a mighty triumph for his foe. He arose a victor from the dark domain, and he lay forever in his place. That bird fluttered flying away with the blood of the dead word upon his throat, and spoke of the Christ of God ascending to heaven with the mark of death upon his resurrection body.

But do you know this? Of all those who will be in heaven for eternity, the Lord Jesus is the only one whose body will bear a scorn for an evidence of suffering. Every other one will be freed completely from every evidence of suffering or pain, but he'll bear for all eternity the mark of his hand. You know, it says when he appeared on earth in resurrection, and Thomas was so unbelieving, the Lord Jesus said to him, Thomas, receive it as I have, thrust it into my thigh.

Receive your fingers and put them in the wounds in my hand. The wounds were there, even though he was in his resurrection body. And long years after John, looking up into heaven, said, I saw in the midst of the crow, and in the midst of the living one, and in the midst of the elders, a lamb as it had been slain.

Wayward and gracious, I saw a lamb that looked as though it had once been offered in sacrifice. By and by, when he returns again, take a look upon him whom they fear. And when he appears to Israel, they'll behold his fiercest hand, and they'll say, Lord, what are those wounds in my hand? And he'll answer, those with which I was wounded in the house of my friend.

Yes, he'll care them forever. Thy wounds, thy wounds, Lord Jesus, those deep, dark wounds, they tell the sacrifice that frees us from sin and death and hell. These binds me once forever to all who own thy grace.

No power these bonds shall sever. No time these tarnishes. Oh, as in life, as with song, I shall know him.

I shall know him as redeemed by his child. I shall stand. I shall know him by the prints and the names in his hands.

Well, what is it that he claims to ever have to do himself in order to be pronounced free? So far as his judicial claims he was concerned, he had nothing to do. He took to a chair and looked on. He saw what the priest was doing.

He saw the bird killed. He saw the living bird nestled, and he realized that in some way it was all meant to be peace for him, but he had nothing to do himself. But just look on.

Have you ever stood for the cross of Jesus and looked on in faith? And have you seen him there suffering, bleeding, dying from grief? And then did you look again and see that that cross is empty now? There's no one hanging there now. But did you look yonder to the throne of God? There's a one who once hung the cross. It is strong as a nail, a bridge to heaven.

And God has declared that all who receive his righteous are cleansed from every sin. To him give all the prophecy of faith, that through his name, whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sin. Dear friends, and I hope you realize that you're a poor lost child.

I beseech you, just give up trying to make yourself any better. Just acknowledge that you're hopelessly lost unless God can do something for you. And then do believe the gospel message.

God has done everything that needs to be done. He's given his son to die for you, and now if you'll just put your trust in him, you will be saved, believer. If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thy heart that God has raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

For with the heart man believeth on the righteousness, and with the mouth confesseth he shall be saved. Just look at that. You can take it all on the fingers of one hand.

It begins with in, and that's on purpose. It ends with say, and that's blessed And then there are three shalt in between. If thou shalt confess with thy mouth that Jesus is Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God has raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

That's all there is to it. You say, but don't I have to pray until I feel that God has accepted me? Dear friend, it's a question of feeling. Do you know how often the word feeling is found in a new fashion? You know, just twice.

And in neither case is it anything to do with our salvation. In the one place, it speaks of our having a great high priest who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmity. In the other place, it speaks of a healer who has been so far that her path changes.

And you know how often the word feel occurs in a new fashion? Just once. And that's in the seventeenth chapter of the book of Acts, where Paul is talking again of a healer, and he says, God is not far from any one of us, if happily we might feel after him. Men who don't have a father, who don't know anything about the gospel, but might groan after God, weep after God, like an infant crying in the night, an infant crying for the light, and with no language but a cry.

But when it comes to poor sinners, anxious to be saved, God has nothing to say about feeling, but he's a lot to say about believing. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

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