

The Incurable Cured

by John MacDuff

John MacDuff's sermon illustrates the parallels between leprosy and sin, emphasizing the need for divine healing and the power of prayer.

Scripture: Psalm 51:7, Isaiah 1:18, Matthew 8:1, Mark 1:40, Luke 5:12, Romans 6:23, Galatians 5:1, Hebrews 9:14, James 5:16, 1 John 1:7

Topics: "Divine Healing", "Sin And Redemption"

Description

John MacDuff preaches about the powerful encounter between Jesus and a man with leprosy, highlighting the man's desperate plea for healing and Jesus' compassionate response, showcasing the contrast between mercy and despair, purity and pollution, and life and death. The scene unfolds on the Mount of Beatitudes, emphasizing the significance of prayer and faith in approaching Jesus for cleansing and restoration. The sermon delves into the deep symbolism of leprosy as a representation of sin, illustrating the terribleness of sin and the need for divine intervention to cleanse and heal the soul, ultimately pointing to Jesus as the ultimate Healer and Savior who can set us free from the bondage of sin and death.

Transcript

When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-15)

I. THE SCENE

Recent and trustworthy travelers have identified a mountain on the west side of the Gennesaret lake, with the "Mount of Beatitudes," from whose two-horned top the Savior delivered His memorable sermon. This mountain is visible from all parts of the lake, its double or "bifurcated cone" mingling in every view of the diversified landscape. A deep ravine, known as "The Valley of Doves"--connects this mountain, with the plain of Gennesaret and the shores of the inland sea. As this retired yet elevated spot was easily accessible, we may imagine the Divine Redeemer often ascending it through the narrow mountain gorge. From the flowers that carpeted the ravine, and the doves that built their nests on the branches overhead, He may have derived the imagery He employs in His sermon; when He speaks of the lilies as clothed, and the fowls of the air as ministered to by an unseen but gracious Provider.

He was in the act of returning in company with the vast multitude back towards Capernaum, when a strange and startling sight disclosed itself. What though flowers were clothing the earth, and birds singing among the branches? What though azure skies over-canopied them, and a lake which was the image of peace was sleeping in quiet loveliness at their feet? One sight and wail of human misery now borne to their ears and confronting their eyes, too sadly reminded them that sin had made this world a world of suffering--full, like the prophet's pronouncement, of "lamentation, and mourning, and woe."

A miserable being, afflicted with the most loathsome and ignominious of diseases, had been brooding in silent thought (possibly for days--possibly for weeks) as to whether he might dare venture to cast himself at the feet of the wondrous Restorer. Vain to this lonely and desolate spirit was all the beauty of that outer nature in the midst of which his existence had been spent. The curse of God was resting upon him. His brother man looked strange and alien upon him. From that ghastly countenance, rich and poor, young and old, fled frightened. What to him were the thickly-studded towns and villages which fringed that scene of busy life--he dared not so much as set foot in one of them; though born a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a child of Abraham; a sad curse severed him from the privileges of the enfranchised nation. What though he saw and heard, spring after spring, at the Passover season, joyful groups with songs on their lips going up to Jerusalem, the city of solemnities; There was no place for him among the multitude that kept holiday. Ceremonially unclean, he was by a terrible edict cut off from the congregation of the Lord. While others took sweet counsel together, and went to the house of God in company, he could only in the bitterest of captivities "weep when he remembered Zion!"

His lonesome home was either some secluded hut amid these Galilee mountains, or if he were permitted to associate with his fellows at all, it was a wretched confederacy with other lepers like himself, who, in their exile communities, only recounted to each other the dismal story of their sufferings, and gazed on faces and frames more ghastly and mutilated than their own.

But what dreams can't Hope indulge in, in life's dreariest exigencies? In such a case as the present, indeed, every vestige of such hope might well seem to have expired; not only was the disease itself inveterate, but this leper's was one of the worst types of it. Luke speaks of him as "full of leprosy." Year after year he may have watched with the horror of despair the slow, silent, insidious progress of the deteriorating disease, like an unseen vulture preying on his flesh--devouring limb by limb, member by member. He had become a loathsome and distorted shadow of what once he was. Life itself was a curse. It would have been to him a blessing to die.

But in that desolate bosom still lay some lingering sparks of hope--the last emotion of the human soul that expires. These were fanned into a faint glow by hearing of the wonders wrought by the Prophet of Galilee. A few weeks before, when the Sabbath's sun had sunk behind the western hills of the Lake; the lame, the sick, the diseased, the dying, had been borne to the Capernaum home of this greater than human Physician. The result was, that that sun rose the next morning on a healed city--disease had fled. Many an aching pillow and anguished heart had been exchanged for songs of deliverance!

Was the suggestion a strange or unnatural one which gathered strength in the bosom of this outcast Leper--"Can't this same Savior heal me? Can I alone not feel His healing touch? Can that omnipotent word not reach this horrible plague--dash the lifelong tear from this eye, and pallor from this cheek--wrench away these torn clothes which (by a severe necessity) I am doomed to wear--open these portals and thresholds I am forbidden to enter--and send me forth a free man, to set my feet within Your gates, O Jerusalem?"

All that he had seen and heard that day may have tended to strengthen his hopes and embolden his resolves. He may have been hovering with eager expectancy outside the crowd on the Mount of Beatitudes--screening himself behind the ledge of a rock or undulation of the hill--the calm silent air wafting to his ear some of the wondrous words of the Preacher! Did he listen to these opening sentences? Did they not appear as if meant for him?

"What!" he would inwardly say--"blessings and benedictions poured on the 'meek,' the 'poor,' the 'persecuted,' the 'despised!' Did not Jesus of Nazareth speak, too, in His closing sentences, as if Omnipotence slumbered in His arm? Why should I set limits to combined power and mercy? I feel assured He is able. Is He willing? I shall try it--I shall test it! Crouching at the feet of this Prophet of Mercy, if I be spurned away, it is only what the past has often taught me to endure. Yes! I, the most wretched of the wretched, will go and claim His pitying love, and throw this suffering body and suffering spirit imploringly at His feet." Thus did a ray of anxious hope dawn on the saddest bosom in all Galilee!

The time has arrived! The tramp of the multitude is heard. They are wending their way down one of the bypaths to the lakeside. In an instant the halting cripple, with head bare and clothes torn, and covering on his lip, bounds from his lurking-place. Shouting the terrible watchword, "Unclean! unclean!" to warn the crowd from his presence, he is prostrate in the dust, his face touching the garment-hem of the One only Being in the wide world from whom he has hope of cure.

It was a wondrous meeting! The two opposites of being--the extremes of humanity--met at that moment in that Gennesaret road. It was a meeting of Mercy with Despair; Omnipotence with Weakness; Sympathy with Suffering; Purity with Pollution; Life with Death! Not more striking was the contrast in nature between the bleak, sterile, torn desert hills on the east of the lake and the fertile garden-slopes on its west, than between that torn and dislocated body and soul--that terrible monument of shattered humanity--and the calm Godlike Being who gazed lovingly down on the wretch who clutched the dust with his deteriorated fingers, uttering the wild lament of hereditary despair--yet mingling this with nobler accents, "Lord, if You will, You can make me clean!"

Moment of thrilling suspense! The multitude and the disciples are panic-struck, and may probably have recoiled from the forbidden contact; they may possibly have urged the intruder to leave. ONE was there who had no such unkind or unmerciful thought. Well did JESUS know all that dreadful history! the touching story of years written in that ashen countenance! He put forth His finger--He touched the body which no unleprous hand had ever before dared to approach! The Omnipotent "I will!" sounded forth, bearing on its wings words of healing. The scales dropped from his face--the flush of health mounted to his cheek--pain fled from his aching limbs. "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles!"

And now we may imagine the multitude, with the restored Leper in their midst, entering the gates of Capernaum, telling to fresh crowds thronging around them of the new sermon and miracle they had just heard and witnessed. The words so full of tenderness and love--of comfort to the lowly and poor and meek; the miracle a display of power unparalleled since the days of Elisha and Naaman. What other evidence was needed that a great Prophet, indeed, had arisen in Israel? It was a twofold marvel even in that old land of miracle and prodigy--"the Lepers are cleansed, the gospel is preached to the poor!"

II. Let us now pass from the Scene, to its GREAT LESSON--the Terribleness of Sin!

We have frequent examples in the Old Testament dispensation, as well as in the course of the Savior's teaching, of outward and visible objects being taken as expositions, or types, of moral and spiritual truths. Of all these emblems, whether in the animate or inanimate world, none was more terribly impressive and significant than the disease of LEPROSY. It is not only that we discern therein some striking resemblances to SIN--the great spiritual malady--and employ the one as illustrative of the other. These resemblances or analogies were no mere accidents.

Leprosy was singled out by God Himself from the vast catalogue of human diseases and sufferings, to keep before the eyes of His people of old a perpetual memorial of the vileness and awfulness of moral evil. The outer body was made by Him a mirror of the far deeper and darker taint in the soul. It was a silent preacher in the midst of the theocratic nation and to the end of time, testifying to the virulence of a more inveterate malady--that "from the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in us, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores." Although it by no means invariably followed that the lepers of Israel were afflicted with their dire plague in consequence of personal sin, yet we know also this to have been the case in several recorded instances, such as those of Miriam, Gehazi, and Uzziah. At all events the disease was regarded by the Jews as a mark of the Divine displeasure. They spoke of it as "the finger of God." It was considered an outward and visible sign of inward disorganization, guilt, and impurity.

But more than this--it was the sign of "DEATH." The prayer of Aaron, in behalf of Miriam, was, "Let her not be as one 'dead,' of whom the flesh is half consumed." By the express injunctions contained in the Levitical law, the Leper was obligated to attire himself in the garments of death. He had to wear torn clothes, the garb which mourners were in the habit of putting on for the dead. His head was to be bare, his upper lip covered--tokens also of grief for the dead. He was to reckon himself thus a dead man. He wore these funereal trappings, as if bewailing his own dissolution--a walking sepulcher--a living corpse in a world of living men. His befitting exclamation might be, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?"

A learned writer, who has described this subject in all its aspects, informs us that this idea of leprosy as an emblem of Death, not only lingered in the Middle Ages among the Jews, but was transplanted, during the Crusades, along with the disease itself, into Europe and Christendom, where "it was usual to clothe the leper in a shroud, and to say for him the masses for the dead."

The same parabolic meaning and intention may be still further traced in the rites employed on the occasion of cleansing a leper. These were precisely what were appointed for cleansing one who had been defiled by contact with a dead body--"the hyssop, the cedar-wood, and scarlet," thus not only identifying leprosy with Death, but making restoration from it an image of life from the dead--a visible sign of what is thus translated into gospel language, "He has quickened you who were dead in trespasses and in sins."

And to complete this terrible picture of the figurative and symbolic meaning of leprosy, the Leper was solemnly forbidden to enter the camp or city of God. This living impersonation of vileness and death was not allowed to stand in the temple courts, or mingle in the solemn festivals of Israel--nor was there any exemption; Miriam, the sister of Moses, and Uzziah, with his kingly crown, had both to bow calmly to the stern statute. "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." He thus solemnly declared, by banning the ceremonially unclean from His holy camp and His holy City, that "evil cannot dwell with Him--that fools cannot stand in His presence"--that He cannot "look upon sin but with abhorrence;" not only that, by exclusion from the earthly Jerusalem courts, He would dimly shadow forth the dreadful truth, that into the courts of the heavenly Jerusalem nothing shall be admitted that "is impure, nor will anyone who does what

is shameful or deceitful."

Solemn, indeed, was that journey which the Hebrew of old undertook, when, on the first appearance of the suspicious taint-spot (the possible precursor of a life of misery and shame), he hurried to God's appointed priest to submit to the testing scrutiny! If, after careful examination, the worst fears were realized--how agonizing the moment when, in exchange for his usual clothing, the torn attire of death was fastened upon him, his head shaved, his lip covered, and the mournful lament put into his mouth, with which he was, in all time to come, to warn every human footstep away, "Unclean! unclean!"

Even if there had been the dim possibility of some subsequent cure, the bitterness of that hour would have been mitigated; but, over and above all the other terrible features in the malady, was its inveteracy. The door of hope (so far as human remedies were concerned) was closed on the hapless victim; he was left to weep tears of disconsolate despair! Unless by some special intervention of Divine power, he was a Leper to the day of his death. The grave alone would close and terminate his sufferings. The disease was incurable--ineradicable!

Have any, who read these pages, the leprosy of unforgiven and uncanceled guilt still cleaving to their souls? Mark this terrible picture of Sin--this Parable of death! You are living a life of death, "dead while you live." Mourners are going about the streets lamenting their dead. "Weep not for them, but weep for yourselves." Let the dead bury their dead! Their funeral hour, the burial rites, are soon over. But if you continue in your present state, what is Life to you, but a long funeral procession? You are bearing within you a dead soul, confined in a dying body! Your throbbing heart, like a muffled drum, beating "funeral marches to the grave!"

Think of this, you who are content to live on in your natural condition, unwashed, unjustified, unsanctified. LIFE--the only thing worth calling life--the life of God in the soul--extinct! "Sin, when it is finished, brings forth death." Saddest of all, you stand, like the Leper, self-excluded and self-exiled from fellowship with God--an isolated being, excluded from sympathy and association with all that is holy and happy in the universe. It is bad enough when a man is avoided by his fellows--when, like another Cain, a brand is set upon his brow, and he has to flee society, to shrink in cowering shame from its glance. But what is that, compared to the fearful position of being exiled and outcast from God and angels--from heaven and holiness--from peace and love--to be unbefriended by that Great Being, whose smile is happiness, whose glance of unutterable wrath is worse than death!

Oh, when I wish a picture of the terribleness of sin--when I seek in old Palestine--that land of type and parable--for some dreadful symbol or memento of God's abhorrence of guilt--I may see it in the fig-tree on the road to Bethphage, scarred and blighted, with its coiled leaves and blasted stem; I may see it in the terrible desolation reigning on the Dead Sea shores (the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah); I may hear it in the roll of its briny waves, as they fret and murmur on the cheerless beach, telling the endless story of submerged cities and of retributive vengeance. But, more terrible and impressive still, when I stand on one of the byways of Galilee, and listen to a parable spoken by that wretched outcast, with his squalid tatters and uncovered head, shut out from the cheerful light of other homes, doomed to listen to no music but the sad wail of tortured bodies and broken spirits like his own--standing afar off from the camp of God, friends and relatives shrinking back at his approach, the trappings and memorials of death, indicating that the King of Terrors has already set his foot upon him, and claimed him as his prey! Terrible emblem surely, of that chasm of separation which yawns, unbridged, between God and the sinner! Infinite Purity hiding His face from infinite guilt!--disowning the very being He made once after His own image, because he has

disowned Him--leaving him to the tyranny of his own sins, consigning him, because he has consigned himself, to the terrors of the first and second death in one!

And add to all, that this sin of yours is incurable by human hand or human skill, as the leprosy of old laughed to scorn the power and skill and art of man. God alone, by a special act of mercy, could arrest the malady! When Naaman came to the king of Israel to demand a cure, the reply of the monarch indicated who alone had power to grant his request, "Am I God, to kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy?" It is the same with sin--it is incurable by earthly agency. An ocean of tears cannot cleanse it; human virtues and merits and penances cannot eradicate its deep, dark blot. Man or angel, beast of the earth, creeping thing or flying fowl, "the cattle on a thousand hills, and ten thousand rivers of oil"--all would be of no avail to purchase freedom from the polluting taint. No hand but One can be stretched forth to save; no voice but One can bid the terrible scourge away! "Lord, be merciful to me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against You."

Ah, if the leprosy-spot of sin be washed from our souls, the sentence of death recorded within us be obliterated, the new life, the Life of God, begun in our hearts, this shall be our befitting confession--"YOU have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living." "The living, even the living, he shall praise YOU, as I do this day!"

Before we leave this memory of Tiberias, let us ponder, for our own spiritual profit and encouragement, two features here specially noticeable in the conduct of the poor outcast who cast himself at his Lord's feet.

I. Mark his PRAYER--"Lord!" Prayer arrests the ear of God. The lisps of this castaway are heard by the Helper of all the helpless. Though wearied and exhausted with uttering a lengthy sermon, and though eager multitudes are thronging around Him, one voice, and that of the most wretched of Galileans, stops the footsteps of Jesus, draws a tear to His eye, and words of mercy from His lips!

Reader, learn the Power of Prayer. Christ's hand is never shortened, His ear is never heavy. He is no longer, indeed, personally near, as He was at Gennesaret; we cannot, as the Leper did, gaze on His countenance and bathe His feet with our tears; but faith can make the Mount of Beatitudes and the mount of Heaven equally near. Science is in these our days completing her vastest prodigy, by bringing the Old and the New World within whispering distance, defying three thousand miles of ocean to arrest the secret in its transit. But mightier far is the agency spoken of here. Prayer, swift as the electric current or volleyed lightning, enters the ear of the God of Sabaoth. The message sent to Heaven is heard while we are yet speaking, and comes back loaded with blessings of peace and love and mercy.

Love prayer--love to frequent the Mount of Beatitudes, the Mount of Blessings. Make the most, too, of the opportunities for prayer while you have the means. If the Leper had allowed Jesus to now pass by, unapproached and unsolicited, he might never again have found Him traveling that way. If the cry of prayer had not now been uttered, he might have been doomed to return to his wretched home, to languish out the dregs of existence in hopeless despair. "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near."

The time of Sickness is such a pathway where Jesus may be met; the hour of Bereavement is such a meeting-place with Jesus; the House of prayer is one of the pathways the Savior loves to frequent. Sabbath after Sabbath Jesus comes down from his Mount of Beatitudes, scattering blessings as He passes. Remember each Sabbath may be His last--His concluding journey--the last time you can cast

yourself at His feet and implore His mercy. He loved the mount of Prayer Himself. He often wandered up that very ravine, to alone make the "mountain" His oratory. Be it so with you; delight often to follow His steps, ascending the hill of the Lord, saying, "I will get to the mountain of myrrh, and the hill of frankincense!"

II. Mark the Leper's FAITH, "If You will, You can!" He believed (and it is all the sinner needs to feel in casting at his Savior's feet), Jesus' ability to effect Cure--"You Can!" He was convinced that the omnipotent Prophet of Galilee had only to utter the word, and the pangs of a dreary and dismal life would cease forever!

"Human power," he seems to say, "and human skill are of no help to me; I have tried every variety of human cure, I have applied every balsam; I have sought, like Naaman, the waters of Israel, I have plunged again and again in Jordan's healing streams, but all in vain; still 'the whole head is sick, the whole heart is faint.' Jesus of Nazareth! I come to You, believing that Your word is mightier than all the waters of Syria or Israel. There is a Physician before me who is better than the balm of Gilead. Oh, You who can bind up the broken-hearted, and proclaim liberty to the captives, give me 'beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning!' Lord, save me! else I perish!"

It is enough--"Jesus put forth His hand and touched him, saying, I will, be clean, and immediately his leprosy departed from him."

One point remains still to be noticed. Jesus enjoined him to "go immediately and show himself to the priest, offering the gift that Moses commanded." What meant this closing injunction?

We find, on reference to the Jewish law, that after the restored leper had satisfied the priest of an effectual cure having been wrought, this minister of God was appointed to take two birds. The one was to be killed, and its blood poured into an earthen vessel filled with running water; the other, tied with a scarlet thread and bunch of hyssop to a stick of cedar, was to be dipped into the earthen pitcher containing the mingled blood and water. With this the leper was sprinkled seven times, and then the living bird was set free to join its mates--a significant emblem or symbol that the leper was now at liberty to resume that interaction with his fellows, which, on account of his disease, had been long suspended.

Who can fail, in all this, to see a far deeper and more touching significance? That bleeding bird, slain by the officiating priest, was a striking type and emblem of a nobler Sacrifice--blood of a nobler Victim, shed to wash out a moral taint, of which the leprosy (terrible as it was) was but a feeble shadow. Who can fail to have suggested (in the mingled contents of that earthen vessel) the recollection of the spear of old which pierced the side of the Innocent One, and from which flowed out a running stream of "blood and water?"

But what of the other bird, bound with its mysterious hyssop-bunch, and tied with red scarlet thread, and which was immersed in the crimson flood? We cannot mistake it. Here, surely, is the type of the SINNER wearing the bonds and fastenings of the everlasting covenant, plunged in the Fountain of blood--that fountain "opened for sin and for uncleanness." Lo! he is free. That bird of old, fluttering and struggling in terror, flew away from the scene of death! With joyous wing it soared with its fellows up in the blue heavens, or perched with them on its native branches in the nearest thicket!

Beautiful emblem of the Sinner! "The Son has made him free, and he is free indeed." The blood and water have effected "the double cure:" the one justifies, the other sanctifies--the one delivers him from the guilt, the other from the pollution of sin. And now behold that once terrified spirit, with wings soiled and plumage

ruffled, soaring upwards and onwards on the pinions of faith, and hope, and gospel freedom, singing up to heaven's gate its untiring song, 'Unto Him who loved me and washed me from my sins in His own blood, to Him be glory and praise forever and ever!'

Yes; "to Him that washed me." There was the special tune in that wondrous type: the bird--the live bird--dipped in the blood of his fellow! It was not a bird dipped in the blood of lamb or goat, but in the blood of one of its own mates--one that had been nurtured, it may be, in the nest, or that had perched and sung with it on the same bough!

Precious truth--Jesus our Fellow-Man! The blood in which our souls are washed is the blood not of incarnate Archangel or incarnate Seraph, but blood that flowed from a human side and human veins--from the Brother and the Friend of the race, the MAN Christ Jesus.

The fellows of the Leper of old, his very friends and acquaintances, fled from him. Not so our Fellow-Man, our Brother on the Throne. He "commended His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners (lepers) He died for us." Are we ushered into this glorious liberty with which Christ makes His people free? Sprinkled with the twofold emblem of blood and water, are we spreading our wings, the wings of faith and prayer, heavenwards, singing the new song, "We are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God?" Beware of defiling yourselves with the leprous taint of Sin. It is contaminating--infectious. Its tendency is to spread; it will eat into the vital principle. If permitted, it will destroy the life of God in the soul.

Keep near the atoning Fountain; be ever traveling to your "Fellow's blood." The scarlet thread, the mark and badge of covenant mercy, has been put upon you; "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty with which Christ has made you free."

If there be one Reader of these pages who feels that, by reason of sin (it may be some recent plague-spot), he is a spiritual Leper--some deep, dark blot defiling the conscience, the sense of pardon obscured, the Divine face hidden--standing thereby excluded from the camp of God; go immediately to the running stream--the perennial Fountain with its crimson tide--adopt as your own, the prayer of a sin-stricken penitent, who had the leper and his cure in view when he uttered it--"Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; yes, wash me, and I shall be whiter than the snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which You have broken may rejoice."

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