

Prayer

Father, You are light to my soul.

You are a light that exposes things I do not want to see, a light that illuminates my sin and shames me; may I always be ready to repent, I pray.

You are a light that reveals the future, and shows my heart what I must do to be Your servant; may I always be ready to be obedient in service, I pray.

Father, You are a light that shines forever. Complete Your work in me and in all Your world, I pray: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look out for work of the Holy Spirit, who gives meaning to everything, and ask Him to work through you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian Aid agencies** Pray for these when they have to work with non-Christian organisations in order to achieve their goals
- Pray for Haiti and for those ravaged by recent storms
- Pray urgently for the country of Chile after the earthquake there

Meditation

When your mind is stirred by Truth, do not let go;
Catch the gift and hold it, and use this eternal treasure.

When your life is warmed by Love, do not ignore it
Let the radiant power of love's embrace enfold you.

When your heart is lifted by Hope, do not turn aside;
Look intently to the One who gave you hope, in love.

When your feelings are blessed by Joy, do not look down;
Breathe the exalted air of happiness and let it thrill you.

When your soul is challenged by Life, do not despair;
Accept the test, it shows the truth about your capabilities.

When your spirit is touched by Light, do not hide away;
Bless the gracious gift of peace with God revealed.

Bible passage – Luke 5:12-16

¹² When Jesus was in one of the towns, a man was there who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and implored Him, 'Lord, if you want to, You can make me clean.' ¹³ Jesus reached out His hand, took hold of the leper and said, 'I want to. Be clean.' And the leprosy left him immediately! ¹⁴ Then He ordered the man, 'Tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, as proof for them.'

¹⁵ However, the news about Jesus spread around all the more, and great crowds would gather to hear him and to be healed of their illnesses. ¹⁶ But he would get away to isolated places and pray.

Bible Study

Review

This simple story of the healing of a leper beautifully captures the early ministry of Jesus. It is a story of human need met by the compassion of the Saviour, who was able and willing to use His authority and power to surmount all obstacles and bring a deeper measure of healing than was believed possible. The story has some intricacies, but in comparison to other healing miracles of Jesus, it is very easily understood, and is often read today in services of healing.

The story occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Luke, and is also found early in Jesus' ministry in other Gospels. It is in the first chapter of Mark (1:40-45), and in Matthew, it is immediately after the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matt 8:1-4). The story is similar in each Gospel, and later on in the study we will look closer at the differences and similarities (see 'going deeper'). Here in Luke, there is little structure to the Gospel, and from this point until Jesus enters Jerusalem (19:29f.), Luke tells us about Jesus' life by relating a mixture of healing and miracle stories, together with reporting His teaching, including the famous parables such as the 'Good Samaritan' (10:30f.), and describing other famous incidents such as the transfiguration (9:28).

We tend to think of leprosy as one disease, but in ancient times, the term could refer to a number of infectious skin diseases. However, because of the fear of leprosy itself and its power to main and destroy life, anything like an infectious skin disease might be interpreted as a form of leprosy and people were unwilling to take chances with it. Those who contracted any skin disease were called 'lepers' and defined by this dreaded name. They had to leave a community, and could only return to normal life if the infection had completely disappeared. The book of Leviticus contains instruction for priests about how to determine whether someone had 'leprosy' and whether the disease had been healed (Leviticus 13,14).

Against this background, one leper ventured close to Jesus as he was visiting a town (5:12). How he managed to get close to Jesus is a mystery, because lepers were usually kept at a distance. The story implies considerable courage either on the part of the leper to get to Jesus, or on the part of Jesus to come close to this leper on the outskirts of a town. This man had heard about Jesus' power to heal and seems to have had no doubt that Jesus could help him. He called out '*Lord, if you want to, You can make me clean!*' (5:13), challenging Jesus to take notice of him amongst the crowds (4:42, 5:1).

Jesus responded immediately to man's faith by confirming that His will was to heal; He said, '*I want to. Be clean!*' (5:13); the leprosy left the man and he was healed (5:13). Looking carefully, we can see that the man asked to be made clean, meaning that he asked to be made ritually clean and acceptable in the community; in other words, he wanted his life back. Jesus granted him his request, and in their minds there was no difference between 'cleanliness' and what we mean by 'healing'. In this instance, the two were one and the same thing. To prove that he had been healed, Jesus told the man to go and fulfil the legal requirement of cleanliness before a priest. This would be the 'proof' necessary for the man to regain His place in the community (5:14). Jesus was not suggesting that the laws of Moses were a necessary part of the healing itself, but they were a part of the process whereby a Jew might be received back into a Jewish community.

The scene concludes with Jesus gaining more notoriety and gathering even greater crowds seeking similar healing. It is therefore not surprising that here, as at other significant moments in Jesus' life, he withdrew from the crowd to be with the Father in prayer. In this way, He gained the spiritual sustenance to continue such demanding ministry and meet the needs of all who came to Him.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why was leprosy feared so much and what does the Old Testament say about it?
- How does this passage compare in detail with Matthew 8:1-4 and Mark 1:40-45
- Where and when does Jesus go to one side to pray?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V12 'clean'

The Greek word 'akathartos' used here refers to ritual cleansing. The man asks for religious and social acceptance rather than healing as we would think of it.

V13 'took hold of him ...'

In most translations you will read the word 'touched him ...'. However, the word means 'take hold of', or 'grasped'. I think it helpful to realise that Jesus did not just offer a brief 'touch', but something firmer and more defined. He '*took hold of him ...*' though we should not presume to know exactly how.

Significant phrases

V12 ' *bowed with his face to the ground*'

Other translations:

'fell with his face to the ground' (NIV)

'fell on his face' (New Authorised Version)

This Greek phrase is difficult to translate, because it reads 'falling upon face', which describes what people did when assuming a position of worship. I prefer '*bowed with his face to the ground*', because this is an understandable description of what people did. Translations that describe falling 'with the face to the ground' make this sound dramatic but in the wrong way, for the drama was not in falling but in what it meant. The leper was worshipping Jesus (see study).

V14 '*as proof for them*'

Other translations:

'as a testimony to them' (NIV)

'for a testimony to them' (NRSV)

The Greek word 'marturion' mostly translated 'testimony', can also mean 'evidence' or proof'. It seems to me that 'proof' is a more understandable word to use here. Grammatically, the proof is not just the offering, but everything commanded by Jesus in this sentence, which makes much more sense (see study).

Going Deeper

Why was leprosy feared so much, and what does the Old Testament say about it?

It is difficult to tie down exactly what was meant by the word 'leprosy' in the Old and New Testaments, except to a general range of skin diseases. There is a description of a range of skin diseases in Leviticus 13 and 14 called leprosy, however, the description here does not tally with the disease we call leprosy today, which is formally called 'Hansen's disease'. People do not recover naturally from this disease, and medical means of halting the disease and eventually offering treatment were discovered in the first half of the twentieth century. However, the Old Testament clearly anticipates recovery from the skin diseases referred to there as leprosy. Leviticus proscribed a series of tests and rites to determine a cure and rid a person of the 'impurity' of the infection (Leviticus 14:1f.). This enabled the person to come back into the community and take up his or her place in society again.

In the light of what is said in Leviticus, it is therefore interesting to see that the most famous incident of leprosy in the Old Testament is a story about a famous Syrian army commander who had leprosy (see the story of Naaman – 2 Kings 5). Naaman was certainly not excluded from Syrian society on account of his disease, and Elisha did not apply the rules and recommendations of Leviticus to this Syrian man!

So clearly, there is a great deal of mystery surrounding the whole subject, and this should make us be cautious about assuming that we are talking about a disease similar to the leprosy today. However, this takes nothing away from the miracle of Jesus' work here in this story. The text says that the man was '*covered with leprosy*' so he was clearly in need, nevertheless, Jesus '*took hold of*' the man, and undoubtedly touched the leprous skin Himself (see notes above for 5:13). These details are not in the story as found in the other Gospels (see below), and it is thought that Luke included them because he was a doctor, and was sensitive to these matters. Some think that Jesus' touch means that power went from Him to heal the man (see Luke 8:45), but whatever happened, Jesus personally bridged the gap between those who suffered and normal society.

Throughout His healing ministry, Jesus accepted total command of such situations and cut across all normal human presumptions about illness. This is as remarkable as the miracle itself. Also, Jesus reached out to the man in compassion because of his impassioned plea for help. Jesus' response says more powerfully than any words could say that He did indeed want to heal and bless those who were in need.

How does this passage compare in detail with Matthew 8:1-4 and Mark 1:40-45

Below, I have copied the versions from Mark and Matthew so that they can be compared.

¹ When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him; ² and a leper came to him and knelt in front of Him, saying, 'Lord, if you choose, you are able to make me clean.' ³ He stretched out his hand, took hold of him, and said, 'I do so choose; I declare you clean!' His leprosy was cleansed immediately! ⁴ Then Jesus said to him, 'Make sure that you speak to no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift prescribed by Moses, as evidence to them.' (Matthew 8:1-4)

⁴⁰ A leper came to Jesus, and he knelt down and implored Him, 'If you so wish, you have the power to make me clean.' ⁴¹ Full of emotion, He stretched out His hand took hold of him, and said to him; 'I do so wish. Be clean!' ⁴² The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. ⁴³ Then He spoke to him strictly and dismissed him, ⁴⁴ 'See that you say nothing to anyone about this,' He said, 'but go and show yourself to the priest and offer what Moses requires for your cleansing, as evidence for them. ⁴⁵ However, when he left, he began to make it generally known, and he spread the news around so that Jesus could no longer enter a city openly. Instead, He stayed outside in more deserted regions. Nevertheless, people continued to come to Him from everywhere. (Mark 1:40-45)

By reading the story in these different versions, you will quickly gain the impression firstly that this was undoubtedly the same incident. The similarities are too strong to suggest otherwise, and the differences indicate characteristics typical of each Gospel. For example, Matthew has set the story immediately after Jesus came down from teaching his followers on the mountain top (see Matt 8:1), and Jesus appears keen to deal with the leper quickly and move on to the many pressing needs all around Him. The story is brief and to the point. Mark, however, more than either Matthew or Luke, emphasises that compassion of Jesus (see '*full of emotion*' – Mark 1:41). Mark also reports that Jesus was keen for the man not to tell anyone else about what had happened (see Mark 1:43). This a typical feature of Marks Gospel, where the Gospel remains a formal secret until Jesus chooses to reveal it, either to the disciples through teaching, or to the world through His death and resurrection.

In contrast to these other Gospels, we can see that Luke, like Matthew, reports the leper's attitude of worship before Jesus (Luke 5:12, Matthew 8:2). Notably, Luke is not as concerned about Jesus' reputation as one who heals people. Mark (especially) shows concern that too many people are crowding around Jesus, but Luke shows more compassion to the many people who wanted to receive healing from Him. The last verse of our passage today speaks of Jesus handling the demand on His ministry by getting away to spend time with the Father in prayer.

Where and when does Jesus go to one side to pray?

A great deal of attention has been given to Jesus' prayer life and what it meant. Luke's Gospel tells us about more incidents of prayer in Jesus life than any other Gospel, and this is the first time Luke mentions Jesus' prayer. Earlier in the Gospel we read about Jesus getting away from the people when hard pressed (see 4:42), and although Luke does not mention prayer in this earlier incident, the equivalent passage in Mark does (1:35). It hardly comes as a surprise therefore when Luke reports that Jesus '*would get away to isolated places and pray.*' (5:16). Luke does not tell us what Jesus said in His prayers, and he never does throughout the Gospel (except at Gethsemane – 22:41f.), so we are only left to guess at what was said. However, it is clear that the Gospels in general and Luke in particular, we are told that Jesus prayed at special and particular moments in his ministry. Those in Luke's Gospel are listed below:

- **Luke 5:16** – Jesus found time to be alone and pray when he began his ministry of teaching, preaching, healing and deliverance
- **Luke 6:12** – Jesus went onto the mountains to pray and then decided to formally announce the names of the 12 disciples.
- **Luke 9:18** – while Jesus was praying he asked the disciples 'who do people say that I am?' This question led Peter to make the declaration 'You are the Christ ...'
- **Luke 9:28** – Jesus took Peter, James and John onto the mountain to pray, and while He was there, He was transfigured and was seen with Moses and Elijah
- **Luke 11:1** – It was while Jesus was praying that the disciples came to Him and asked Him to teach them to pray. Jesus' answer was the famous 'Lord's prayer'.
- **Luke 22:41-46** – Jesus' most agonising prayer, and the only one of which we have some record, is the prayer he said in the garden of Gethsemane before he was arrested and taken to His death.

It is easy to believe that Jesus prayed to the Father about everything that was happening as he took on the complex ministry He had been given. We can hardly suggest otherwise. However, it is at least worth asking why Luke records Jesus as praying at this moment and after this healing miracle. There are two possible answers. Firstly, Jesus had already resisted the temptation to do miracles that would draw attention to Himself as the Messiah (see 4:1-13). Perhaps He had to keep close to the Father when performing miracles such as this to ensure that the boundary line was not crossed, and the healing miracles were indeed for the glory of God and not merely to parade Himself as Messiah.

This last point is supposition, of course, but the next is more factual. If we look ahead beyond this passage, we will see that the next two incidents recorded by Luke contains the first confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. This confrontation was to become a defining feature of His ministry, and one that foreshadowed His eventual persecution by the authorities in Jerusalem and death on the Cross. This was certainly an important point in Jesus' life.

Lastly, Luke reports that it was Jesus' habit to pray; it was something he did regularly. It is a mercy that Scripture does not recall whether the regularity was daily, several times a day, or any other figure. If we had this information, then it would surely be regarded as the only proper way for Christians to organise their quiet times! The important thing to remember is the fact that Jesus did this regularly; it was His custom to pray. Whatever practice we maintain for our prayer life, regularity is the key to a good prayer relationship with the Lord.

Application

This is a very basic story about Jesus' miraculous healing ministry, but it is profoundly insightful. Jesus is shown as wanting to heal and to help people in the midst of difficult personal circumstances, and Luke does not hide this. As we saw in yesterday's story about the miracle of the large catch of fish, a miracle is a sign of God's work in the world, but a healing miracle is almost always offered out of sheer compassion.

God's people are called to follow in Christ's footsteps, so we should be people who want to help those who are in need of healing, in every possible way. Unless there is a heart amongst God's people to help others as Jesus helped them, healing ministry becomes stale. Sometimes the ministry of the church turns into a matter of intricate discussion, of taking care not to offend, of defining when and where this ministry can take place, and who can do (and who must not). Surely, if healing within the fellowship of the church is made into such a monster, it has ceased to be the ministry of Christ. If we feel we have nothing to offer except by hedging this around by caveats and conditions, then we have lost touch with the Spirit of our Lord, who saw need and acted immediately to help, out of compassion.

Just as we cannot fully understand the nature of the illness written about in this passage of Scripture, most of us cannot hope to understand the complexities of modern medicine and its amazing ability to deal with a wide variety of human conditions. However, the church's ministry of healing is still an essential part of both its own mission to bring the Gospel to all people, and also a ministry to those who are sick, for no other reason than that they are people in need who are sick. Surely there is no Christian who cannot both pray and do things to help those who suffer. All of us may do this differently, and all of us can learn from our fellow Christians how we can extend the gifts and graces God has given us, and increase our own ministry. This is the true starting place for the healing ministry of God's people. When a church fellowship maintains a base-line of care and practical love, it can then offer an effective healing ministry at other levels. Some of these may be prayer for the sick after its services, and further specialist ministry for those who have deeper troubles by arrangement with those who are trained. Too many people start with such things, and when people who receive ministry find that no one cares for them on a day to day basis, they give up hope, and even trust in Jesus.

A heart of care like Jesus' heart of care will always find a way to help, and a Christian heart of care is one that knows the Holy Spirit is just waiting to help and bring relief to suffering through every form of help, prayer and service we can offer. Also, we do not have to copy the particular words of Jesus from any of His healing miracles, we only need to have a personal relationship with Him so that He can tell us what to do.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does this passage of Scripture help us understand and develop the healing ministry of the church today?

2. In your group, use any means available to you (encyclopaedias, internet, etc.) to learn more about leprosy and its affect on countries and societies across the world today. What can the church do to help those who suffer?
3. What does this passage of Scripture say to us about prayer and its relationship to healing ministry today?

Topics covered by this text

- *The healing ministry of God's people, the church*
- *Prayer and its importance as a regular activity*
- *The importance of healing enabling people to return to 'real life'*

Personal comments by author

I have been involved with different forms of healing ministry for years, and I am convinced that the most important feature of healing ministry is a loving community in which people feel cared for and supported. Yet too often, people find it hard to accept that this is part of Christ's 'healing ministry', and those who have genuine gifts in healing ministry discount the importance of this to their peril. Yet where all God's people work together in bringing healing to a community, the results can be amazing. The Lord longs to work in our midst in power, and to do it through us!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How comfortable are you with praying for healing? Start by praying and talking to the Lord about your own illnesses and problems. Then extend this to speaking to Him about other people's problems. The more you do this, the more you will find blessing in your own health and be a means of God's blessing of others.*
- *Seek to discuss the healing ministry of the church with people in your own fellowship. As you read through Luke's Gospel, you will find there are many stories of healing. Make a note of each of them and their characteristics as you go through the Gospel.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, help all of us who read about your healing of the leper, to be ready to offer help to those who ask us. May we never be afraid to give time and attention to those who are sick, and may we never be scared to pray for healing. Use us to care for others we pray. AMEN
