



Jeremiah 30:17

¹⁷ But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,' declares the LORD, 'because you are called an outcast, Zion for whom no one cares.' NIV

Sermon

These words of Jeremiah's prophecy are indeed most relevant to thousands of people suffering from leprosy in our world today. The scripture reads, 'outcast for whom no one cares' in most Bible translations. But, what is the definition of an outcast? Interestingly enough, if you click on the Thesaurus tab in a Word document, the alternative words given for an outcast are; untouchable, exile, outsider, pariah, recluse, castaway and the word 'leper'. Click on Google and the definitions are; pariah, persona non grata, reject, untouchable, foundling, waif, stray and once again, the word 'leper'. In a 'proper' English dictionary, the Oxford dictionary, the definition of an outcast is 'a person who has been rejected or ostracised by their society or social group'. It is indeed very sad that the word 'leper' continues to be so wrongly and improperly applied in such a manner to label a person that is reviled and unwanted.

Nevertheless, in scripture the leprosy sufferer is symbolic of the ultimate outcast: infected by a condition he did not seek, rejected by those he knows, avoided by people he doesn't know and condemned to a future he cannot bear.

In our world, the divorced sometimes know this feeling as do the children of alcoholics. Meanwhile we keep our distance from the depressed and avoid the terminally ill. And often these people decide that rather than seek help, they'll retreat from contact with other people. The risk of being hurt is too great. It's safer this way. Maybe it's the homeless person who, has been laid off and isn't able to find work in spite of his best efforts. Or maybe it's the boy or girl in school who is not as pretty or handsome as the rest, or maybe they have a physical condition that draws attention to them. Or maybe it's the 'geek' or 'nerd' or whatever, and everyone avoids them. Maybe it's someone of another nationality or even their skin colour. The point is that there are plenty of people around that we would rather avoid being around, for one reason or another, and many times it's something beyond their control, like leprosy. We have 'quarantined' them from our world.

But now, let's see how Jesus reacted to the outcast. In Matthew 8:1-4, Jesus gives us a wonderful example of how to treat the 'untouchables'.

Matthew 8:1-4 - When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. ² A man with leprosy¹ came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." ³ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. ⁴ Then Jesus said to him, "See that you

don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Let's look at how we can make that example a part of our lives too.

Firstly, we learn that Jesus took the risk of touching the need. When the man asked for healing, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. We should remember, in those days people believed that even just touching the person could spread the disease. Can you imagine the reaction of the crowd when they saw this? They must have gasped as they thought, "What is he doing? Doesn't he understand that he is now unclean because he touched that leper? I thought he was a Holy man! Not to mention the fact that he might get the disease himself!"

But Jesus didn't care what the rest of the people thought. He was only concerned about this man. Touching him wasn't 'proper', and it wasn't even healthy. But He did it anyway. Jesus' touch was likely the first one he had had from a 'clean' person since contracting the disease. What would his first reaction be? He may have feared that he would be the cause of Jesus catching the disease too. Awe and astonishment that anyone would purposely touch him probably overwhelmed him.

All of a sudden, he saw that he was accepted. Jesus' touch cured not only the disease, but also his loneliness. He was no longer the outcast, at least as far as Jesus was concerned.

Touch is so powerful. A loving touch upon another human being can make all the difference in the world. God designed touch to be used and understood that way. And here's Jesus, the perfectly sinless Son of God intentionally touching this person full of disease. So here's an action step to help the social outcasts in our world. Next time we see that person, put a hand on their shoulder and look in their eyes for a moment. And in doing that we'll communicate something they have probably not heard in a long time. It says, "You're no longer an outcast to me".

Secondly, we learn that Jesus spoke words of compassion. He said, "I am willing. Be clean." Not just words of pity, but words of compassion. What's the difference? Pity is defined as "sympathetic sorrow for one suffering, distressed, or unhappy." It's a feeling we have toward the suffering, and that's a good thing. But pity doesn't go far enough. We need to move on to compassion. Compassion is the action we take toward the suffering. Jesus said, "I'm willing to do something about this". And He did. He spoke healing into the man's body and spirit and the man was clean.

We can't always speak words of healing, but we can verbalise our desire to help when we can. We can't always send money or tangible items, but we can always pray for people. But the point here is to speak words of compassion - words of action on our part to help someone, especially those who can't help themselves. So, the action step is to speak of God's compassion then demonstrate it tangibly somehow. It's important to recognise that Jesus' words were tied to his actions. We must ensure our words do the same.

Thirdly, we learn from Jesus' interaction with the man with leprosy that He saw the person behind the need. Jesus didn't see a problem, as big as that problem was. After all, this poor man was cut off from everyone he loved and had to live on the good will of those who brought him food, clothing, bandages, etc. He didn't just see a disease needing to be cured, although that would have been enough. No, Jesus saw a person created by God in his very own image; a person for whom God had plans; a person whom God had gifted to contribute to society and to the Kingdom of God; a person with potential to do great things and.... a person He would die for.

When we look at our 'outcasts', what do we see? Do we see the problems? That's what most people see. But we need to grasp the fact that God sees way past all that. God sees someone He loves so much that He sent his Son to die for that person. A person He loves every bit as much as He loves you and me. We must stop evaluating others by what the world thinks about them. So here's the next action step we can take; pray that God would help us to see people with His eyes.

Finally, we learn that Jesus redirected the glory to the Father. Jesus says, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." Jesus wasn't seeking glory for himself, but rather for the Father.

Jesus had two main priorities; expanding the Kingdom of God and bringing glory to the Father. When the man went to the priests, what do you think the priests would say? "Thank you for this wonderful man named Jesus who brought this healing." No, they would offer their prayers to the heavenly Father, *Adonai Roph'ekha*, our God who heals. The Father would get the glory, because they would recognise this healing as being from the hand of God Almighty.

James 1:17 tells us, "Every good and perfect gift is from above". So as a final action step, let us "give thanks to the Father who is the source of all good things", and mean it. Deflect any glory you might receive to the Father. Do something and when thanks come your way, suggest that they thank the Father.

Restoration

It takes Jesus living in and through us to help with the outcasts around us and to help restore them to better circumstances, better health, better living conditions, acceptance by their families and communities, and to self-respect and dignity.

In many parts of the world today, leprosy still carries a great stigma. Many people with leprosy-caused disabilities continue to suffer terrible discrimination. They are labelled as 'cursed' and are often excluded from their communities and also from their own families and loved ones. The Leprosy Mission in its Kingdom-building assignment works to bring about healing, rehabilitation and acceptance of people who have been affected by this mildly-infectious and curable disease.

Dipak lives in Nepal. He was diagnosed with leprosy when he was 10 years old. Although he received treatment for the disease, his right hand was already damaged. As the years went by Dipak was finding it increasingly difficult to work at his family's small furniture business because of the damage to his hand. He has also become anxious about his future. How would he earn a living? What girl would marry him when he had visible signs of leprosy?

Thankfully, Dipak's village is served by a Leprosy Mission clinic. When his hand started to 'claw' as a result of leprosy, Dipak was referred to Anandaban Hospital - a specialist Leprosy Mission hospital. The clinic knew that only Anandaban Hospital could provide Dipak with the life-changing surgery needed to restore his hand, completely free of charge.

After a five-week stay and surgery at Anandaban Hospital, Dipak is amazed by the mobility in his hand. He is starting to use his hand once again and feels that he can have hope for the future.

"I was feeling afraid before the surgery and did not know what would happen or whether my hand would be better or worse," he said. "But I am so much better than before and can feel my hand getting stronger by the day."

Dipak was touched and healed through the love and compassion of a God-directed ministry.

The reality of many people suffering from leprosy, however, continues to be rejection and exclusion. But, in the midst of all human suffering and rejection, Jesus came to earth to restore broken humanity and He still makes all who come to Him new and provides them with everything they need.

For the last 6,000 years mankind has been in rebellion against God and has suffered the consequences of broken living, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Over and over, we have proven that we are incapable of restoring ourselves. That was why God sent His only Son, Jesus. The Son of God came to restore broken man to his intended purpose, to be a Temple of the Holy Spirit, a place of communion between Himself and His creation. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Restoring broken lives is God's number one priority. Ephesians 6 tells us, "All the resources that you need to live a restored life in Christ have been provided." The work... has been paid in full. The Sacrifice....has been paid in full.

Back in Joel 2:25 God promised, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten."

Indeed, Jesus' ministry proved that promise;

- ❖ In John 8, when the woman was caught in adultery and dragged broken and shamed to Jesus' feet.....He restored her soul and her womanhood.
- ❖ In Luke 19, when a crooked tax collector named Zacchaeus repented of his corruption.... Jesus restored his life.
- ❖ In Mark 5, when Jesus encountered a demon possessed wild man who had terrorized his community for years and couldn't be tamed with chains...Jesus restored him and left him clothed and in his right mind.
- ❖ In Luke 17, when Jesus ran into the 10 men with leprosy who had been cut off from society.....He restored their health and their reputations.
- ❖ And, in Acts 9 a fanatical, religious bigot named Saul was restored through an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

For the last 2,000 years Jesus has been restoring broken lives that Satan and the world have tried to destroy.

Today we still live in a very dark world, a world where people kill one another, and wars and terrorism abound; a world, where people are enslaved by addictions to alcohol and drugs, abuse, materialism, self-centeredness. But God's word tells us that a light will break through the darkness because God is a God who restores.

No matter what darkness we face or endure, we can still rejoice, for the light is coming. Morning is on the way. God has sent his Son to bring light into our lives. God has sent his Holy Spirit to invade and possess our soul and give us peace and joy. God has promised a day when all oppression and evil will cease. And God has promised to be a God who heals and restores... physically and spiritually, in this life or in the next.

Amen.

Suggested hymns and songs:

Traditional

The Kingdom of God is justice and joy
Make me a channel of Your peace
What a friend we have in Jesus
Lord Christ, who on my heart didst bear
Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old
Jesus, restore to us again (Graham Kendrick)
Beauty for brokenness (Graham Kendrick)

Contemporary / modern worship songs / choruses

Here I am to worship (Tim Hughes)
God of justice (Tim Hughes)
For all the people (Filled with compassion)(Noël Richards)
I am the God that healeth thee (Don Moën)
Have you heard the good news (Stuart Garrard/Delirious)
Humble King (Brenton Brown)
This is our God (Chris Tomlin)
Love mercy (Andy Bromley)
Healing rain (Michael W. Smith)