

Sermon by Tim Cain in the Kaleo Church on July 15th, 2017 on

Mark 1:40-45

Leper

There are few things in life that hurt us more deeply than the feeling of being rejected. In the Farewell season of American Idol a few years ago they had Kelly Clarkson come back and sing one of her songs. It was an emotional performance that left nearly everyone in the room crying. It was a song that Kelly wrote about her Father and how he had abandon her when she was just six years old.

The Song begins,

All I remember is your back
Walking towards the airport, leaving us all in your past
I traveled fifteen hundred miles to see you
I begged you to want me, but you didn't want to

Throughout the song the camera would pan through the audience and you could literally see pain in people's faces. You see it was a song about rejection and that is something all of us can relate to in one way or another.

Psychologists will tell you that one of our most fundamental needs as humans is a need to belong. That is why rejection hurts so much because rejection tells us that we don't belong, that we aren't welcome, that people don't care about us.

Right now if you wanted to, you could close your eyes and it would only take a moment for you to bring to mind some of the rejections of your past. And no matter how long ago they were there are details that you can remember that would make it seem like it was only yesterday. Some of you would see your parents fighting and hear the slam of a door as your family shattered to pieces. Some of you would be sitting across the table at a coffee shop as the person you thought you were going to marry tells you they didn't think it was going to work out. Some of you would hear the voices of your children yelling at you as they drove away in anger. Some of you would hear the insults of a mother and others would hear the laughter of your classmates.

We know rejection. We have all experienced it and it has left gaping wounds in our hearts that feel pain every time something triggers our memory. And the question many of us are left asking is "Will it ever go away?" Can the wounds we feel so deeply ever be healed, will the fear that follows us ever subside. Is there a place where we can truly feel safe, a person that we can truly trust, a relationship where we can be fully known and still be fully loved?

Tonight I want you to know that you aren't the first person to ask this question. In the Bible there is a story about a man who experienced rejection that exceeds anything that you or I could ever imagine.

In Mark 1:40 we read about a man who had a disease called leprosy. Leprosy is an infectious disease that causes disfiguring skin sores as well as nerve damage to the arms and legs

and other skin areas around the body.” In ancient times leprosy was incurable and would ultimately lead to death. Now if that was all that leprosy did, that would be terrible, but as bad as these things were they were only the tip of the iceberg.

You see here is the thing about leprosy. In ancient Israel as soon as it became clear that someone had leprosy they were immediately removed from their homes and taken away from their families and forced to live in isolation outside the city. As a leper you were forced to wear torn clothes, have unkempt hair, and anytime you saw another person you would have to shout out at the top of your lungs unclean, unclean.

I want you to imagine this man’s life for a moment. He was likely an ordinary man just like you or me. He had a family, he had friends, he worked for a living, he had dreams and desires. And then one day he noticed a skin sore on his arm. He tried to keep it hidden for a while but eventually someone noticed. And then one night the priest came to his home and they examined him and told him to say goodbye to his family and with only the things that he could carry he was quickly ushered out of his home and away from his wife and children and forced to live alone out in the wilderness.

This man would never be able to hold his children again, he would never get to eat a meal with his family again. He would never work again, never do anything productive again, never be able to help his family in any way.

No from now on everywhere he went people would look at him with fear and shame. You see the thing about leprosy is that people didn’t feel sorry for lepers because leprosy was seen as a curse by God. That means that everyone who saw a leper thought that it was their fault that they were sick and they despised them and thought they were getting just what they deserved.

Can you imagine what this man must have felt like? The loneliness, the shame, the heartache, the broken dreams and lost opportunities. Can you imagine sitting all alone in the desert thinking about your family having to go on without you. Thinking about your spouse being looked down on because of the shame that your disease had brought upon her. Imagining the way your kids were being made fun of because of you and there was nothing you could do to stop it. There you sat, year after year as open sores spread gradually throughout your skin and the nerves in your arms and legs gave out so that gradually you began to feel less and less. Unfortunately, leprosy doesn’t do anything to numb the nerves in your heart though, so the loneliness, the rejection, the pain, the fear, the confusion, the sadness, these things just kept getting worse and worse.

And here is the kicker. Because leprosy was seen as a curse from God the leper couldn’t even find comfort in their relationship with God. You see lepers didn’t just suffer from being rejected by everyone that they loved, lepers also felt as if God himself had rejected them. Because he was unclean, this man wasn’t allowed to go into the temple or to offer sacrifices or to worship God with everyone else.

So there he sat in the wilderness feeling forsaken by God, cursed with this terrible disease that had left him utterly alone, rejected by everyone in the world that he had ever loved. There could be no greater experience of shame and rejection than that of a leper in the ancient world.

But one day this leper heard about a man who was going around healing people and teaching them good news. This leper heard that the man's name was Jesus and that he was even able to cast demons out of people who had been possessed.

And for the first time in years a glimmer of hope appeared. Maybe, just maybe, this was his chance. The more stories he heard about Jesus the more convinced he became that Jesus was actually powerful enough to heal him of his disease.

Now the only question that remained was would Jesus be willing to do it. You see after all of the rejection he had experienced he found it really hard to believe that there was anyone out there who really cared about him. Anyone who after seeing his oozing wounds would still love him. I mean if his own wife and children had rejected him why would this traveling prophet even give him the time of day?

On the other hand, what other hope did he have. Jesus seemed to be his only chance. So with his tattered clothes and his unkempt hair and his numb feet the leper began to stumble to where he heard Jesus was preaching. And when the crowds saw him they would have gasped and parted like the red sea in order to avoid becoming unclean or even worse risk getting leprosy by accidentally touching him.

So this man found that he had a direct path to Jesus. And as he approached Jesus he waited to see if he too would move back in order to avoid him. But he didn't. Instead Jesus just stood there. And in Mark 1:40 we read that when this man came to Jesus he fell to his knees and "implored Jesus saying, "If you will, you can make me clean."

All of his hopes, all of his dreams, all of his future, life and death seemed to hang in the balance as he waited to see how Jesus would respond. He knew that Jesus had come from God and that meant that Jesus was able to heal him, but what he didn't know, what he was scared to death to find out, was if Jesus would actually want to heal him. Did Jesus care? That is what he didn't know.

Was Jesus going to treat him like everyone else did or was Jesus different. This man knew that he was unclean, he knew that he was an outcast, he knew that he had been cursed by God, what he didn't know was if Jesus would be willing to associate with the unclean or how Jesus felt about outcasts or if Jesus would bless someone who had been cursed.

Every moment must have felt like an eternity as he waited to see how Jesus would respond. In verse 41 Mark tells us what happened. First, Mark tells us that Jesus was moved with pity. The Greek word actually means "warm indignation." When Jesus looked at this man and saw the pain in his eyes and considered the suffering that he had been through, the Bible says that he was angry. He was filled with this warm indignation and his anger was against pain, his anger was against suffering that this man had been through. He looked in his eyes and he felt the hurt and the loneliness and the rejection that this man had experienced and it made him angry.

And then Jesus did what no one else had ever been willing to do. Jesus did what this man's wife had never done, what his parents never did, what his children refused to do, Jesus, who had never met this man in his life did what no one else in all of Israel had been willing to do.

Jesus touched him. Where everyone else had been pulling back, Jesus reached out. And I want you to listen very carefully to what he says. Jesus says to the man "I Will; be clean."

This man came to Jesus wondering if he was willing to heal him, wondering if he was willing to make him clean and fix everything broken in his life. In the midst of his disease, in the midst of his pain, in the midst of his rejection this man wanted to know if Jesus cared and if Jesus was willing to do whatever it took to make him better.

And Jesus comes and he says "I Will." Jesus comes to the leper and he says, I care, I care and I am willing to do whatever it takes to make you better and to prove it he reaches out his hand and he touches him.

Some of you may feel like you can relate to this leper. Like him you have felt rejection. Like him you have been carrying around wounds from your past, like him you may believe that God is able to heal you, but what you struggle to know is does God care enough to do it?

Tonight, Jesus comes to answer that question for you. Tonight, he comes to you in your brokenness, he comes to you in your loneliness, he comes to you in your fear and your pain and he says "I will; be clean." He comes to tell you that he cares, he comes to tell you that he knows everything about you and he still loves you, he comes to tell you that even when everyone else pulls back he will be there reaching down to take your hand. He isn't repulsed by your curse, he isn't turned off by your sin or your failure, he isn't dissuaded by your shame and he won't pull back from your weakness.

You see this isn't just a story about a leper, this story is meant to be a picture of God's heart towards those who have been rejected.

You see one of the reasons that leprosy is talked about so much in the Bible is that it is a graphic illustration of what sin is like. Like leprosy sin goes far deeper than our skin and actually numbs us to reality. Like leprosy sin is ultimately accompanied by suffering and death. Like leprosy sin makes us unclean and alienates us from the relationships that we long for.

That is why even though we don't have physical leprosy everyone in this room is familiar with loneliness. Sin separates, sin breaks relationship, sin causes us to do things that lead to our being rejected and sin causes people to reject us even when we haven't done anything wrong.

But what makes sin so terrible is that it doesn't just break our relationship with friends and family but what makes sin so terrible is that it ultimately breaks our relationship with the God who made us.

Sin separates us from the very source of our life and our happiness and our hope. That is why we go through life never seeming to find the satisfaction we are longing for. That is why we live with this insatiable desire for something more. You see we were made to walk with God in the perfect garden of Eden forever, but because of sin we find ourselves struggling to live without God in the wilderness of this world until death comes and separates us from the people we love the most.

You see the reason that it matters so much how Jesus treats lepers is because the way that Jesus treats lepers is meant to be a picture of how he treats sinners. And if we were honest the question that this leper asks Jesus is the question that has haunted us all of our lives. Is there anyone who could know everything about us and still love us.

You see all of us have things that we are hiding. Things that we have said or thought or done that no one else knows. And the reason we keep them hidden is because we are afraid of being rejected. We are afraid that if people saw our leprosy they would shake their heads and turn away from us. We are afraid if they really knew everything about us there is no way they would be able to keep loving us. And the reason we are so afraid is because it's happened before. All of us have experienced the pain of putting ourselves out there only to be rejected and we don't ever want to feel that way again. So we wear long sleeves and do everything we can to keep our leprosy out of sight.

But tonight I want you to know that you don't have to live like that anymore. You see the Bible teaches us that there is one person who loves lepers. One person who is willing to reach out when everyone else is pulling back, one person who will hold our hands when everyone else is covering their eyes, one person who knows everything about us and he still cares.

Not only does Jesus care but he is able to fix everything that we have broken. He is able to make us clean. In Isaiah 1:18 God says, "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD; though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

Tonight if you will come to Jesus like this leper did, if you will kneel before him and confess your sins and your failures you will find that he is able to wash them all away.

Now you might wonder how on earth this is possible, well tonight I want to tell you how it's possible.

I want you to look again at this story in the book of Mark. After Jesus healed the leper verse 44 tells us that he sternly warned him not to tell anyone but instead to go to the temple and show himself to the priests and offer the sacrifices that the law required for someone who was healed of leprosy. You see in the book of Leviticus chapter 14 it makes it clear that the healing of leprosy must always be accompanied by sacrifice.

This case would be no exception. You see Mark goes on to tell us that the Leper didn't listen to Jesus, but instead he went out and spoke openly about what happened and spread the news. Because of that verse 45 tells us that Jesus was no longer able to enter the towns but instead he was forced to remain in desolate places.

There is a reason that Mark tells us this. You see what Mark wants us to know is that the price that Jesus paid for cleansing this leper, is that he had to trade places with him. You see before the leper was the one living in desolate places and Jesus was going about freely from town to town, but now because he healed the leper Jesus is forced to remain outside the towns in desolate places, while the leper is going freely from town to town telling everyone what Jesus did. Mark is making it really clear that the price that Jesus paid in order to cleans this man of his leprosy is that he ended up having to trade places with him.

Tonight I want you to know that just like Jesus traded places with this leper so that he could heal him of his disease the Bible teaches us that in order to forgive us of our sins Jesus had to come and trade places with us.

And that means that Jesus, the perfect son of God would have to endure all of the rejection that you and I deserve. When I began this message I told you that I was going to tell you the story of a man who had experienced more rejection than you or I could ever imagine. You may have thought I was talking about the leper but I wasn't. You see as much rejection as the leper in this story endured there was one person in history who has endured more.

This person's name was Jesus and in John 1:11 the Bible says that Jesus "Came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."

Isaiah 53:3 tells us that Jesus was "Despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

Why you might ask. Why would the perfect Son of God ever be rejected? We are rejected because of our sinfulness, we get rejected because of our weakness, we get rejected because of our failures but why would the perfect Son of God who was powerful enough to create the universe ever be rejected?

Isaiah 53:4 tells us why he was rejected. It says, "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his stripes we are healed."

On the cross Jesus died the death of an outcast. There outside the city he hung naked and ashamed. And when Jesus called out to his Father for help the Bible tells us that God himself forsook him. Why? God forsook Jesus so that he could welcome us. He pulled back from his own son so that he could reach out and take our hand. On the cross Jesus took our place, there he died the death that we deserved, there he was treated like a sinner so that God could welcome us as if we had never done anything wrong.

Jesus may have reached out and touched a leper but on the cross Jesus reached down and died for sinners like you and me. So if you came here tonight wondering if God cared about you, if you came here tonight wondering if he could possibly love you after all that you had done, if you came here tonight wondering if he had rejected you, your answer can be found at the cross.

At the cross your savior proclaims loud and clear “I care, I care about you.” At the cross your savior says to you “I will, be clean.” The cross is the touch that you and I need, it is the place where we can go and kneel and find forgiveness for our sins.

Kaleo church though your sins are as scarlet there is one who is able to wash them white as snow. Even though your mother and your father may have forsaken you there is one who is willing to take you in. So tonight I want to ask you to come to Jesus. Come to him and repent of your sins and acknowledge your failures and let him forgive you. Come and lay before him all of the rejection you have ever endured and know that he understands. Not only does he understand but he promises that if you will follow him one day he will reach out his hand and he will wipe every tear away and the pain and suffering of your past will disappear forever.

Years ago there was a man in our church whose story was full of rejection. When he was 5 years old his parents had tied him up like a dog and kept him in the backyard. One day he got loose and he broke into the neighbors house and when the police got there he was sitting on the floor scarfing down food from their refrigerator.

They took him and his brother away from their parents but they didn’t keep them together. He went from one foster home to another until he decided he would rather live on the streets. By the time I met him he had lived on the streets for over 40 years.

I will never forget the night he shared his story with me. We cried together and I took him to Psalm 27:10 and I asked him to read it. With a broken voice he read “Though my mother and Father forsake me, the LORD will take me in.”

From that moment on his life was never the same. He began to pray at Bible study and he began to devour his Bible and he began to tell everyone who would listen about this God who welcomed outcast and loved sinners.

You see for the first time in his life he found someone who knew everything about him but loved him anyway. Someone who would never leave him or forsake him, someone who would take him in when everyone else was too busy taking care of themselves.

And like the leper in this story this man couldn’t keep this good news to himself. He told everyone and he told them with a joy and boldness that was beautiful to watch.

So what about you. Have you come to Jesus and experienced the healing that he offers? I don’t want you to come to him tonight?

And if you have come to Jesus and experienced the healing that he offers how have you responded to his love?

In this story Jesus commands the leper not to tell anyone about how he healed him and even though he should have obeyed Jesus the leper was so overwhelmed by what Jesus had done that he went out and told everyone what happened anyway.

But what about you and me. We have been healed of a disease far greater than leprosy. We have a savior who bled and died on the cross to rescue us from sin and death and eternal hell and then after healing us Jesus has commissioned us to go and tell others the good news.

So why do we keep silent? This leper was so overwhelmed by what Jesus did for him that he couldn't contain himself so why are we containing ourselves?

I know it can seem intimidating but because we have a savior who has welcomed us in we don't have to be afraid of being rejected by others. In fact the goodnews we are trying to tell people is that because there is one who loves them no matter what so they don't have to live in fear of being rejected anymore. But how can we expect anyone to believe that message when we ourselves are still living in fear of being rejected?

So tonight I want to give you a practical place to begin. Tonight I want to encourage you to speak more freely about all that God has done in your life to other Christians.

Whether that is after the service or at a missional community or with your spouse or to your children or with your friends. You see even as Christians I think oftentimes we spend more time talking about the news or the weather or food or even gossip then we spend talking about the greatness of our God and the love he has shown us. And if we aren't talking to each other about God then we will never be able to speak authentically with people who don't believe what we believe.

So lets begin with each other and the more comfortable we get talking about Jesus to one another the more natural it will be for us to talk to our coworkers or our friends or family about him.

And if you are struggling to feel like you have anything to say about Jesus and his love then I encourage you run back to him again. Run to him and tell him you need him, confess how you feel, admit your weakness, acknowledge your fears and let him love you. Let him reach out his hand and touch you and remind you that he cares and that he will never leave you or forsake you.