

The Touch of Mercy

Jesus and the “Unclean”

What difference does a touch make?

“Untouchables”

- In the Hindu religion, there are “castes”
- The lowest caste: the “untouchables”
- Most notorious example: the *Dalit* of India
- Consider what it would have been like to be a member of the Dalit before 1940
- In Judaism, the form of this condition was “uncleanness”

“Arbitrary” uncleanness

Leviticus 11:13-23

“These are the birds you are to regard as unclean and not eat because they are unclean: the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, the red kite, any kind of black kite, any kind of raven, the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the white owl, the desert owl, the osprey, the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat.

“All flying insects that walk on all fours are to be regarded as unclean by you. There are, however, some flying insects that walk on all fours that you may eat: those that have jointed legs for hopping on the ground. Of these you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grasshopper. But all other flying insects that have four legs you are to regard as unclean.”

“Arbitrary” uncleanness

Leviticus 11:24-25

“You will make yourselves unclean by these; whoever touches their carcasses will be unclean till evening. Whoever picks up one of their carcasses must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening.”

Leviticus 11:33-35

“If one of them falls into a clay pot, everything in it will be unclean, and you must break the pot. Any food you are allowed to eat that has come into contact with water from any such pot is unclean, and any liquid that is drunk from such a pot is unclean. Anything that one of their carcasses falls on becomes unclean; an oven or cooking pot must be broken up. They are unclean, and you are to regard them as unclean.”

This was a **serious** matter!

Leviticus 11:43-45

Do not **defile** yourselves by any of these creatures. Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them or be made unclean by them. I am YAHWEH your God; **consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy**. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground. I am YAHWEH, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore **be holy, because I am holy**.

God-designed uncleanness

Leviticus 12:1-5

YAHWEH said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding.’”

“Uncleanness” meant sin!

2Corinthians 6:14-17

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” Therefore, “Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.”

“Uncleanness” meant sin!

Leviticus 5:2-6

“If anyone becomes aware that they are **guilty**—if they unwittingly touch anything ceremonially unclean (whether the carcass of an unclean animal, wild or domestic, or of any unclean creature that moves along the ground) and they are unaware that they have become unclean, but then they come to realize their guilt; or if they touch human uncleanness (anything that would make them unclean) even though they are unaware of it, but then they learn of it and realize their **guilt**; or if anyone thoughtlessly takes an oath to do anything, whether good or evil (in any matter one might carelessly swear about) even though they are unaware of it, but then they learn of it and realize their **guilt**—when anyone becomes aware that they are **guilty** in any of these matters, they must confess in what way they have **sinned**. As a penalty for the **sin** they have committed, they must bring to YAHWEH a female lamb or goat from the flock as a **sin** offering; and the priest shall make atonement for them for their **sin**.

God meant them to take heed!

Leviticus 7:20-21

But if anyone who is unclean eats any meat of the fellowship offering belonging to YAHWEH, they must be **cut off from their people**. Anyone who touches something unclean—whether human uncleanness or an unclean animal or any unclean creature that moves along the ground—and then eats any of the meat of the fellowship offering belonging to YAHWEH must be **cut off from their people.**”

(Cf. Exodus 31:14

“Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it is to be **put to death**; those who do any work on that day must be **cut off from their people.**)

“Untouchables”

Leviticus 13:45-46

“Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; **they must live outside the camp.**”

Did lepers deserve this fate?

- Were they being punished for some sin?
- Was their being untouchable a matter of public hygiene or disease prevention?
- “Unclean” seems to have referred to things that most people found disagreeable
- God was trying to tell people something about the way He views sin
- The inscrutability of the designation seems to have been a part of the point

Jesus and the unclean

Matthew 8:1-4

When Jesus 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 cleansed of his leprosy. 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.”

Think carefully

- What Jesus did not do
 - Suspend, even temporarily, the requirements of the Law of Moses
 - Touch the man in order to heal him
 - Anything that was unnecessary to His purpose
 - Sin (*cf.* **Hebrews 4:15**)
- What Jesus did
 - He did exactly what the Law said He was not allowed to do: he touched an unclean person
 - If the Law meant what it said, He made Himself unclean
- Given what we read in the Law about uncleanness, the only reason we know that Jesus did not sin in this action was that scripture says He was without sin!

What difference does a touch make?

What difference?

Luke 19:1-9

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Uncertainties and certainties

- I cannot explain all Jesus's actions relative to the Law
- He came to make right what sin had made wrong
- He would not be deterred by things that we find disagreeable
- In making Himself unclean in order to heal uncleanness, Jesus showed the triumph of mercy over corruption
 - **2Corinthians 5:21**— “God made him who knew known sin to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
 - **Galatians 3:13**— “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”
- In Jesus's time, touching a leper was a σκανδαλον, a *scandalon*
- ***Do not imagine that what Jesus did to remove your sin is any less of a scandal***

What difference does a touch make?

Following Jesus

Matthew 16:24

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

- Are we willing to follow Jesus in His ministry to the “unclean”?
- There aren’t many lepers nearby for us to touch, are there?
- Then what about “the Other”?

“The other”

- Any person, or group of people, in a circumstance that you would find intolerable, in which you would want and expect someone else who cared to help you, to share your burden, to reach out to you as a fellow human being.
- We can't spend all our time ministering to the material needs of people who are less-fortunate
- Our defense mechanism: don't think about things over which we have limited or no control
- Our problem: we push into the category of “things over which we have no control” a lot of things that we can influence
- “The other” are, for us, the **untouchables**

“The other”

- “They” are not like “us”
- They are in unfortunate circumstances because they are stupid, or lazy, or make bad decisions, or have the misfortune to live under a corrupt government
- God saw that they are less-deserving of the things that we have
- Somehow, they deserve exactly what they get
- “We” would never get into such a situation
- Because they are “the other,” neither we nor anyone close to us has to care anything about them
- They can be banished from “our” camp, cut off from “our” people, and **we don’t have to think about them**

“The other”

- Not very many years ago, some “Christians” considered people whose skin was a different color to be “the other”
- That is how the religious conservative political movement in this country got started in the 1970s
- It is a **blessing** to be a member of a Christian fellowship in which people of all backgrounds and races are welcomed
- But to all of us, especially those of us who have been privileged by our ethnic background, **the test** is not whether we accept people of other races into this fellowship
- **The test** is how we see people we encounter unexpectedly, maybe under stressful circumstances
- Are we threatened by people who do not look like us; do we view them as “the other”?

“The other”

- To Jesus Christ, you and I are “the other”
- Jesus Christ really never would have been in the situation in which we have put ourselves
- He reached out and touched us, sinners who are as repugnant to God as any leper would be to us

Matthew 14:14— “He had compassion on them and healed their sick.”

Matthew 15:32— “I have compassion on these people, for they are hungry.”

“The other”

- Make no mistake: our primary assignment is to deal with people’s eternal destiny, not their physical welfare

However

- Reaching out to “the other” is one way **we make a difference**

John 9:2-3

His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

- Perhaps this world is the way it is so that other people can see the compassion of Christ in us
- **“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care”**

“The other”

- We will be judged for it

Matthew 25:45

“Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

- “The least of these” is “the other”
- When He told this story, Jesus was challenging the Jews to reach out to the Gentiles, whom they regarded as “unclean”
- Today, He is challenging us to reach out with compassion, to be **children of our Father in heaven**

Going to Jesus

Hebrews 13: 11-14

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. **Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.** For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.