

Brave Enough to Follow
Part 2
I Am Willing
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September 17, 2017

I trust that as you look to the people to your left and to your right, you will notice, as I do every Sunday standing on this platform staring at your beautiful faces (yes, thank you), we are a global church, we are a global community.

This church, over its 90 years, has existed for one purpose: the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a conviction and a prompting and a leading of the Holy Spirit that that Gospel is meant for every nation, every tribe, every language, every people on the face of this planet.

And so I trust that you are looking forward to the DNA Conference that starts in a few weeks. We will hear more about Guret – he will be here with us, and many other things that God is doing all across the world as His Gospel takes roots in the hearts and lives of real people.

You can open your Bible to Mark 1:40. As Gregg mentioned, next Saturday I will be running in our 5 km. race for refugees. If you go onto our website and click on “Silas Hill Run” you can sponsor someone. You can just type in my name and sponsor me there.

If you were in church last week you realized there was a video shown where Niki Dee (sp?) dropped the mic and challenged me to a race. And so I could use the support of this community to raise funds so that I don’t have to grow my hair.

We have a little side wager that the loser has to either shave his head or grow some hair. So we will see how that turns out in the next couple weeks.

If you were with us last Sunday you realize we have started a new series. I have called it “Brave Enough to Follow.” But I have also called it “Faith Enough to Follow.”

Jesus has moved to Capernaum. He has launched His very public ministry now. He walked up to Peter, James and John, who were fishing on the Sea of Galilee. They experienced a miraculous catch of fish and Jesus to them, “Follow Me and I will make you into fishers of men.”

And so we are looking at five events that take place in the six to nine months before the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is training them, He is equipping them, He is teaching them about ministry in order that they may be fishers of men.

And so there are some key important lessons for us. And I mentioned this last week; I will in fact mention it every week; there are two primary things that Jesus is doing with His disciples throughout the Gospels. And we actually see that pattern into Paul’s letters to the early churches.

Christ is constantly teaching them to have a proper understanding of who He is and at the same time He is revealing to them His priorities.

These are two things for every believer to be aware of. We need to understand the power of Christ, His authority; and we also need to understand the priorities of Christ, His activities.

We need to be aware of these things as we grow into maturity in the faith.

And so Jesus preached. Last Sunday we looked at how He preached on the Sabbath in a synagogue in Capernaum. During His sermon a demon possessed man manifested and Jesus cast out the demon.

We talked about His authority over the demonic. And in response to that event the whole town shows up, many who were sick or demon possessed, and Jesus has been healing and casting out demons late into the evening.

And just to put our story into context this morning, Jesus gets up early the next day after that Sabbath day. He goes and He prays alone with God. And when the disciples find Him, He says, “We must go to the surrounding villages to preach the Gospel of the kingdom there as well. That is why I have come.”

And so what we are going to look at in our time together this morning is right after that moment.

But before we dive into Mark 1:40 let me tell you a little story.

I grew up going to high school in the 90’s. It’s around 1989, 1990 (you can do the math; I turned 43 recently).

And when I was going to school the Chicago Bulls were the biggest thing. And of the Chicago Bulls, Michael Jordan was the greatest NBA player of all time.

I don’t care if you argue with me; we will talk about that after service if you want.

And Nike had just come out with the Jordan brand. Everybody was wearing the clothing with that iconic figure of Jordan doing his Air Jordan move.

And when I was in Grade 9 the Air Jordan shoe had just come out. And I remember all my friends wearing this shoe. If you were the cool kids you were rocking the Jordans. It didn’t matter if they cost \$200, which in today’s wages is about \$2,000 – you were rocking those Jordans.

And so I was a part of a basketball team and a basketball culture when I was in high school. I was into the Chicago Bulls and I remember so desperately wanting those shoes. I didn’t want any other shoe; I wanted the Air Jordans, Mom and Dad.

Do you think they got it for me? I probably wouldn't be talking about it today, 23 years later or 30 years later. I wanted those shoes so desperately because all the "in crowd" had the right labels. They were wearing the right clothing.

And I remember I would show up with my Nike Flight shoes, which were cool but not the ultimate cool, and feeling a bit on the outside looking, and feeling somewhat ostracized from the other kids because my clothing didn't quite measure up or quite fit in.

Now that might just be a silly immature story to illustrate a point, but all of us in this room have experienced moments, whether culturally or socio-economically; we have all experienced moments where we felt like we were outside the club. We felt like we were on the outside looking in.

Some of us; it might be the lunch that we brought to high school, and when we opened up that lunch that was different from all the other kids in high school, we got teased or bothered because of the lunch that we opened. (Can anyone say egg salad?)

So we have all had those moments where we feel on the outside looking in, and we live in a world of labels.

And Jesus, leading His disciples, today we are going to see how Jesus opened the eyes of His disciples to the devastating impact of labels, and how one of His priorities was to help the disciples to see, feel and respond to those who often felt the rejection of others because of their label.

We are going to read from Mark 1:40. You will notice that the Bible translation that I am going to be using moving forward is the NIV translation, but the 1984 edition. They updated their translation in 2011 (that happens to be the ones in the pew) and there are just a few minor changes they made that I am returning to the 1984 edition. So that's what I will be reading from this morning and going forward.

Mark 1:40 says this:

"A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'

"Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!'

"Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

"Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning:

"See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.'

“Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.”

What I want to talk about in our time together this morning is seeing, feeling and responding.

Verse 40:

“A man with leprosy came to him and begged him, falling on his knees, ‘If you are willing, Jesus, you can make me clean.’”

To understand why this is such a significant moment, and all the Gospel writers except for John include it in their Gospels, we need to appreciate and understand New Testament culture and the Old testament rules and the laws around leprosy.

Let’s first understand physically how leprosy works. Leprosy is a disease of the nervous system. Let me just read a few of the symptoms physically that take place when you have leprosy.

Its symptoms start in the skin and peripheral nervous system, then spread to other parts such as the hands, feet, face and ear lobes. Patients with leprosy experience disfigurement of the skin and bones, twisting of the limbs and curling of the fingers that form the hand into a claw-like feature.

Facial changes include thickening of the outer ear and collapsing of the nose. Tumor-like growths form on the skin and in the respiratory tract and the optic nerve may deteriorate.

The largest number of deformities develop from a loss of pain sensation due to extensive nerve damage. Inattentive patients can pick up a cup of boiling water without flinching.

Leprosy destroys nerve endings that carry pain signals. Therefore patients with advanced leprosy experience a total loss of physical pain. They start to speak but because their nose and cartilage is deteriorating, their voice comes rather through the nose than the mouth.

When someone has full blown advanced leprosy they are difficult to even stare at because of what it has done to their body.

This was the situation that this man found himself in.

Now that’s just the physical aspects of the disease. Let’s look at the social aspects. According to the Scriptures in Leviticus Chapters 13 and 14, if you got leprosy you needed to appear before the priest so that it could be inspected. And he is pronounced unclean, if you have the disease.

The priest confirms his condition and calls him unclean, and then his shame is to be made known. His clothes are to be torn, his head can be uncovered but he must put a covering over his upper lip and he must cry out “Unclean, unclean!”

His living conditions are changed. He must dwell alone outside the camp where all the other lepers are. In New Testament times they had homes that were called “Sever Houses” which meant separated homes.

So if you received this life-changing disease, not only physically were you going through all kinds of pain and turmoil or loss of pain, in New Testament culture this man would be living with an unbearable label in his life, having to always cry out, “Unclean, unclean!” when he saw other people.

And most translations state that this man was full of leprosy, so the disease, we can assume, is in an advanced state.

And as with most leprosy patients, he cannot feel the physical pain of his disease because it is destroying his ability to feel physical pain. But you can be certain he feels the social pain. He feels the pain of isolation. He feels the pain of separation from the rest of God’s people.

And the pain of people’s stinging words when they see him approaching them, telling him to stay away from them. He feels the pain of people’s looks and horrific expressions on their face when they behold what the disease is doing to his body. Although he can’t feel physical pain he is feeling all kinds of emotional pain.

I looked up some photos of leprosy this week. Many were too graphic to show. I want to show you this mild one just to give you a sense of what this disease does to the body and how it disfigures people’s humanity.

And the disciples are following along with Jesus. They have dropped everything, dropped their livelihood, they have given their lives to full time ministry. They see this leper fall before Him. I am sure they probably would have reacted differently to this leper had they not been with Jesus.

I wonder if they would have even noticed this man. I wonder if they would have allowed their day to be interrupted by him if Jesus wasn’t with them.

Following Jesus wasn’t comfortable. It required bravery and faith because of the situations He is leading them into. And it probably caused them to pause even in moments like this. And in some instances it cost them their reputation if they were seen speaking, let alone touching this leper.

And we just saw a video of Guret in Ethiopia serving amongst the Afar people. And there is a cost to following Jesus. He was excommunicated from his tribe for giving his life to Jesus. It requires bravery and it requires faith to follow Christ.

Now the word leper in our modern age defines the disease that this man had, but in our culture the term leper has also come to be used to describe a person who is avoided or rejected by others for moral or social concerns.

And with that definition in mind, in our modern day and age we look around society and we realize that in a world of labels that we live in there are modern day lepers among us, people who are avoided or rejected by others all around us.

And the question becomes for us as a church, do we see them? Do we even notice them?

Social experiments have been conducted that illustrate this reality of how someone dresses or what someone wears or their station in life or their cultural background, whatever the case may be, that there are lepers among us. And sometimes when we behold them we distance ourselves from them.

Social experiments have been conducted online. And I watched a video this week that illustrates this very reality in our culture, which you are about to watch.

It is a video of two gentlemen. One dresses up as a homeless man, another dresses up as a business man. Both are walking on crutches and fall down in the city of New York. And the experiment was to see if there would be a difference in the reaction of people to a man who fell on crutches when he is dressed nicely or to someone who has the appearance of a homeless man.

Please direct your attention to the screen and watch this.

It is a difficult video even to watch. They spent the whole day in different parts of New York City conducting that experiment. And the only time someone stopped to help the man dressed like a homeless man was a homeless person himself.

You see the danger in our world today is that we see the label; we don't see the humanity behind the labels that we have constructed for certain parts of society. We see the category that we have placed them in but we fail to see their humanity.

I remember for a number of years I was working downtown Toronto near Spadina and Dundas and working with some of the youth. There were homeless people all around us in the communities that we were working in.

And I remember doing a Bible study about the Good Samaritan with some of the youth that were in our program.

And one evening we walked out of our gathering together and the church we were at located downtown was in a difficult community, again filled with homelessness and poverty and all kinds of issues.

And there was garbage collection the next day so all the garbage of the businesses around the church and the church itself were out on the front curb. And we opened the front door, we stepped out, and as we were talking, all of a sudden a voice came from the garbage pile. And it said, "Help me!"

And I remember looking at the youth and we couldn't see the person who had fallen into that garbage pile. All we could see was the garbage. For a moment I thought the garbage is talking to me.

And again a voice came that said, "Help me!"

It was a hot humid summer evening, and I remember walking around the corner and in the pile of garbage was a man with two canes who had fallen on his back. He was unable to get up.

He was wearing everything he owned on that hot summer evening, all the clothing that he owned, and with a thick wool jacket over top of all of it, laying there in a pile of garbage, unable to get up.

When I saw him and the smell of the garbage and the smell of the man himself, it was difficult to breathe. And I looked at the youth and they looked at me, and we had just been talking about the Good Samaritan, but to be honest with you, it was difficult staring at the man in front of me.

I remember walking in behind him and putting my arms down underneath his arms and as I lifted him up to his feet, I remember the smell of what he was wearing, I remember the food that was in his beard rubbing up against my face, his sweat, his perspiration rubbing up against me.

Sometimes we only see the label that we attach and we fail to see the humanity that is all around us. This poor man who fell at Jesus' feet has lived with a label maybe all his life, certainly for a number of years because he is filled with leprosy, he has experienced moments like we just saw where everybody passes on the other side of the road while he calls out, "Unclean, unclean!"

And he has witnessed their horrified expression when they see his face, maybe missing even parts of his body.

And with all this, this poor man falls to the ground before the maker of heaven and earth and he falls with his face to the ground in a posture of reverence before Jesus and he says, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

Now he is not saying, "Lord, if You feel like it, You can make me clean"; rather he is saying, "Lord, if it doesn't violate some cosmic purpose of God, You can make me clean."

And look at how Jesus reacts to this man.

Verse 41; let's start with this:

"Filled with compassion,"

Filled with compassion; it is a Greek word that talks about and describes a feeling to the very core of your being. Jesus sees the man – that's the most important thing – He sees the man – not the disease, not the leprosy. He sees the human being and He is filled with compassion.

And biblical compassion moves us into action.

Jesus feels deeply and is moved by the needs of this man. And what is remarkable in the rest of Verse 41 is this reality of how He responds:

“Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.”

And He says,

“I am willing. Be clean!”

A man who everybody avoided, a man who others would distance themselves from, a man who maybe hasn't experienced physical touch in who knows how many years. And Jesus, the maker of heaven and earth; Jesus, the one who knows every hair on his head; Jesus the one who is familiar with everything he has ever been through; Jesus, the one who witnessed the scorn, shame, humiliation and guilt that this man felt every day says, “I am willing.” And He touches the man.

It is profound what Jesus does here because in New Testament times you did not touch a leper. It would make you unclean yourself ceremonially.

But when Jesus touches someone, he doesn't become unclean; what He touches is restored and becomes clean.

But I look at this event and there are all kinds of miracles that Jesus did in Capernaum prior to this account. There are all kinds of things that take place in the synagogue at Capernaum and afterwards at Peter's house where there are all kinds of healings.

Why did three Gospel writers include this one? Why does this one stand out so differently than the others?

Because of how Jesus healed the man, because He touched the man. Jesus could have spoken it clean. Jesus could have said, “I am willing. Be clean!” And the leprosy would have left him still, because He is the authoritative Word from God.

Jesus could have made some ointment and said, “Here, rub this on your body and you will be clean.”

The fact that Jesus touched the man is so profound in this healing, three Gospel writers have to include it in their Gospels.

And I imagine this man who hasn't been touched, this man who has felt all this pain – I always imagine Jesus placing His hands on either side of his face looking deep into his eyes, a man who hadn't felt touch for who knows how long, feeling the touch of the Divine and Jesus saying, “I am willing. Be clean!”

What is Jesus teaching His disciples through this event? What are they witnessing about who God is through this account?

Jesus is filled with compassion. Jesus sees past the labels and He wants to be in relational physical contact with the other, and to love the unclean. That's why He came.

This moment, this event doesn't only reveal that Jesus has the power to heal and to make what is unclean clean. But the way in which He did it also tells us so much about His compassion and His priorities. He restores the man's physical condition, but by His touch, He also restores to him a sense of humanity.

Jesus didn't avoid the unclean people of society. In fact, that is who He came for. He came to redeem and restore them.

And when I read this account this week, I have got to be honest with you, church, I felt more like the man who had leprosy, moments where I felt like, "Lord, I have an incurable disease, a leprosy of compassion, a leprosy of indifference, a leprosy of labels through which I call people and I view them. Lord, I need You to touch me. I am an unclean person. I need You to heal my vision of how I view others" because at the end of the day we can have a leprosy and incurable sin disease that taints the way we view one another.

And so I was praying this week, "Lord Jesus, please make me clean. Remove this disease of how I label people and view them."

Jesus didn't avoid the unclean people of society; that's good news to us who are unclean. He came to redeem and to restore them.

And the church was never meant to be a place that was distanced from the unclean. It is meant to be a place where people can come and find healing, where people can experience the compassionate touch of Jesus and be transformed.

And in order for us to be that kind of believer and that kind of church, we need to spend time with Jesus and be filled with His compassion. We need to look past the labels that we put on others, we need to see the humanity of others and we need to take the time to touch and be among those who we might formerly have deemed unclean.

Recently I was challenged by an example of how we label people and how it influences our response to their plight. A number of years ago when ISIS began to sweep across Iraq and Syria, it led to an exodus of refugees out of Syria, out of Iraq. And there were concerns that terrorists were among the refugees.

Wherever the refugees went that were fleeing Syria, oftentimes they were met with fear and therefore they were the unwanted ones. We gathered them together and put them in refugee camps. They were often met with rejection or exclusion from the dominant culture to which they were fleeing.

And I understand some of the fears that people carried. But there was a photo that came out that awakened compassion within the global community. Now I am about to show this photo. Parents, if you have children, I would just ask for the five seconds that this is going to be up on the screen, that you would be mindful of that. It is a difficult photo to stare at.

But this is a photo that hit the global media of a child who was fleeing with his family. They were in fact trying to get to Canada. They were fleeing the violence in Syria. And when we look at that photo, the global community all of a sudden was filled with compassion because it was reminded that the refugee crisis was afflicting those who could not defend themselves.

And all of a sudden churches started to sponsor Syrian refugee families. The church started to respond to the needs of those who were fleeing life threatening situations. When I look at that photo of that child I think of Matthew Chapter 25.

Jesus, at the end of all time, gathering all people to Himself, will ask the question, “When I was hungry, did you give Me something to eat? When I was thirsty, did you give Me something to drink? When I was naked, did you clothe Me? When I was sick or in prison, did you visit Me?”

As I look at that photo of that child I think to myself, am I responding in compassion to the needs of the other? Despite what label we might attach, do I see the common humanity in the other or do I just see Middle East refugee?

Are we like Jesus who was filled with compassion? The leper in this story falls before Jesus and says, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.”

And Jesus says, “I am willing. Be Clean!” And by his grace at work in our lives, we become willing as well. Filled with His compassion, because He transforms us when He comes into our lives; filled with His compassion, are we willing to welcome the refugee?

When we are in union with Christ we become willing to know them. We become willing to have relational contact with the other, whoever they may be. We become willing to give of our resources to help. We see past the labels.

Jesus looks across the world to those who are desperately seeking Him and declares to them, “I am willing.” And He throws open the doors of the church and He says to the global community, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest for your souls.”

That is why, as a church, we operate the Silas House, a transitional home for refugees from all over the world because refugees are some of the strongest people that I have ever met. They have had to travel and traverse situations that are life-threatening and difficult. They have had to move to a country not their own, adopt to a different culture, many of them weary and heavy laden.

And they are welcomed into a Silas House to discover a Jesus who says, “I can give you rest, not only for your physical condition but for your soul.”

One touch from Jesus makes what is unclean, clean.

That is why next Saturday we are running a 5 km. race to raise funds so that we can welcome more people from all over the world in Jesus' name.

Today you have the opportunity to sign up for that race. My prayer is that we hit the maximum number of runners that we are able to in our community.

Why do we do this? Because we are filled with the compassion of Jesus.

We don't do this for Jesus; we do this with Him. And we do it because we see, we feel and we respond to what we see and we feel. And it is the compassion of Jesus that moves us. Jesus, filled with compassion, touches this man and makes him whole again.

He heals him of his shame, humiliation and guilt.

And as we leave today, may we join Him in this mission. May we be a church, a body filled with compassion and touching the lives of others around us.

That's my prayer for us today as a church, that we would have eyes to see beyond the labels. As we leave this place, Monday through Saturday, that we would be so connected to the compassion of Jesus that we would reach out and be the hands and feet and comfort that He wants to be to the people He puts in our path this week, be it a homeless person downtown; may we see them with new eyes and love those who are desperately longing for it.

We are going to close with a time of worship, again asking this Jesus to fill us with His compassion.

Let's pray.

Father, we acknowledge that in our media saturated lives, in our culture, in the busyness of life we can be distracted and we can fail to see beyond the labels that we put on people. We can fail to see the stranger and see their humanity. Give us new eyes to see this week. Grant us Your compassion. May it move us to serve where we can, to love where we can. May we be filled and motivated by Your Spirit at work within us.

We ask this in Your name.