

Though Your Sins Be as Scarlet...

By D. L. Stephens

G. K. Chesterton told a story of Francis of Assisi who Chesterton said was terrified of leprosy. One day as Francis was traveling he encountered a leper in the narrow path that he followed. The man was horribly white in the sunshine; he was a man full of leprosy. Instinctively Francis' heart shrank back, recoiling from the contamination that the loathsome disease brought with it. But then he rallied; and ashamed of himself, ran and cast his arms about the sufferer's neck and kissed him and then passed on. A moment later he looked back, and there was no one there, only the empty road in the hot sunlight.¹

Francis overcame his fear of that repulsive disease, but he is rare among men, for there are few who would have embraced a man full of leprosy.

Leprosy and Sin.

Luke says concerning Jesus that,

Luke 5:12 ...it came about that while He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man full of leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on

¹ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 757). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

his face and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."²

This leper did not doubt Jesus' ability to heal him. He believed the only thing that would prevent his release from leprosy was Jesus' willingness.

Leprosy at that time was an incurable disease. Even today it is difficult to cure. Moreover, it causes an ugliness that is hard to approach. It is perhaps the most loathsome of diseases. Many believe that God chose leprosy as the symbol of sin and its consequences. The Law of Moses certainly carries out this idea. Sin. Uncleaness. These two ideas lie together.

The Law of Moses says,

Leviticus 13:45 "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' 46 "He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Luke tells us that this man was "full of leprosy." He was a leper past all hope of recovery. In this condition he would be a repulsive sight. The whole appearance of his face would have changed until he looked like a lion. Nodules grow on the skin. They ulcerate. Discharges flow. The eyebrows fall out. The eyes stare. The voice becomes hoarse. The victim wheezes. Ultimately the disease spreads inward. It ends in consumption, dropsy,

² Scripture quotations from the New American Standard Bible: 1995 update. (1995). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

suffocation, and death. This man was not far from that end.³

"Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean," he said.

To many Jews of that far off day uncleanness was at least as horrible as the disease. It meant to be an outcast from Israel, to be classed with swine, and dogs.

So, besides asking to be cleansed, the leper asked that the Lord would remove his shame. And remember this: to the Jew, whether true or not, a man's physical condition told of his spiritual condition. And this man asked to be made clean—he did not ask for good health, although it is implied that good health would accompany cleansing.

What is incurable to man is not incurable to God.

Mark wrote in his gospel about the inability of the disciples to cast out a demon:

Mark 9:14 When they came back to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. 15 Immediately, when the entire crowd saw Him, they were amazed and began running up to greet Him. 16 And He asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" 17 and one of the crowd answered Him, "Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; 18 and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your

³ Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1995, pp. 217, 218.

disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.” 19 And He answered them and said, “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!” 20 They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth. 21 And He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. 22 “It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But **if You can do anything**, take pity on us and help us!” 23 And Jesus said to him, “**‘If You can?’ All things are possible to him who believes.**” 24 Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said, “**I do believe; help my unbelief.**” 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was rapidly gathering, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.” 26 After crying out and throwing him into terrible convulsions, it came out; and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, “He is dead!” 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up.⁴

The disciples could not cast out the demon. The father in his desperation asked his Creator, “...if You can?” The father had asked Jesus, the Son of God, Who can do all things, “...if You can?” It was a pitiable question, but perhaps one that could be excused on the grounds of the man’s loss of hope and surrender to

⁴ Emphasis mine, author.

despair. But Jesus answered, “All things are possible to him to believes.”

Belief encompasses the healing of demonic possession—even the type that the Apostles of Christ could not heal. But Jesus could heal the boy. And Jesus can heal a leper—even one who is full of leprosy.

Jesus reaches out to the most pitiable, and repulsive.

The leper was beyond help so far as man was concerned, but he believed.

Luke says of the leper that Jesus,

... stretched out His hand and touched him.

He touched him!

And Jesus said, "I am willing; be cleansed."

And immediately the leprosy left him. Luke 5:13

No matter how loathsome the disease—or the sin. The Lord can touch the sufferer or the sinner and the malady will leave.

He is willing to cleanse—to forgive.

Matthew 19:23 And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 “Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 25 When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” 26 And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but **with God all things are possible.**”

God can save the rich. God also offers salvation to the most wretched.

Isaiah wrote,
Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, and let us reason together,”
Says the LORD,
“Though your sins are as scarlet,
They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be like wool.

There is the story of a preacher who was delivering a written sermon on temptation to his church when it occurred to him that the address was unsuitable for many of the people. He paused, looked away from his manuscript, and, appealing with a loud voice to the more-distant of his audience, said: “Perhaps among those pressing in at the door there may be someone so miserable as to think of throwing himself over yonder bridge, saying, “It’s too late to tell me not to enter into temptation. I have done it; I am in it. There’s no hope for me!”

He then continued, “Stop! Stop! There is hope. Christ died for thee. He will forgive. He will save even thee!”

A few weeks afterward one of the members of his church told him that he had called to see a woman who one Sunday evening had made up her mind to throw herself over Blackfriars Bridge, but she thought it was too light and a policeman might stop her; so in order to wait for the darkness she went into the church and stood in the crowd inside the door. Standing there, she heard what the minister had cried out, and it seemed to her that he had called to her directly to stop and come to Christ.

So she went back to her home to pray. Now she has come to Christ and is content.⁵

You may not hear a preacher depart from his sermon and call out to you directly, but the invitation is there, nevertheless.

God has extended the blessings of Christ's sacrifice to the whole world, and has made it available to all mankind. Martin Luther well said, "It is a patent fact that thou too art a part of the whole world; so that thine heart cannot deceive itself and think, the Lord died for Peter and Paul, but not for me."

He died for you, too.

⁵ Ibid., Tan, P. L. (pp. 1078–1079).