

The Willingness of God  
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Grab a Bible and turn to Lev. 13 (READ vs. 1-8). Lev. 13 continues Moses' treatment on the importance of cleanliness and also begins the lengthy instructions of how to diagnose and treat leprous diseases. There's a kind of sickness that makes you unclean; not all sickness would make an Israelite unclean, but leprous diseases would. Well, unclean for what? Unclean to God. After the tabernacle was constructed, the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle and the Lord promised to physically dwell with his people. And because God is holy and pure, he can not dwell in the midst of a people who is impure and unclean.

There were certain conditions, certain times when the people would be unclean; and being unclean they could not be near God (for their own sake - God was looking out for them). Dead carcasses were unclean, so they had to avoid them. Sexual encounters would make a person unclean so they would need to be cleansed prior to approaching God and offering him sacrifices. And there were some illnesses or sicknesses that made a person unclean.

Sometimes, you could transfer these impurities to others. Leprous diseases were one of these things. If you weren't careful, you could catch someone's impurity. Since that's the case, as we read in chapter 13 there were procedures to minimize or reduce the risk of passing on the uncleanliness of corpses of illness. We read in that passage some procedural steps people would go through to determine if they were unclean or not.

But what would that mean? What would happen if you were declared unclean? Look at vs. 45-46 (READ). What's going on with this passage? For the sake of the community, for the sake of the health everyone else, God commanded the diseased and contagious to separate themselves so they would not infect more people. In our modern world with the advances of treatment for so many diseases, this seems strange. But we had a chance to go back in time not too long ago with the news of the Ebola outbreak in Africa, right? If you were coming from Africa into America you were quarantined. This was so strange that some people felt their freedom was violated, they felt ostracized, but what else could be done about contagious diseases that you don't know how to stop? It was for the good of the community.

But, imagine going through such a situation. Imagine wearing the label "unclean." Imagine needing to isolate yourself from others. Consider others not wanting to be with you; picture in your mind what it would be like and look like to cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" so that if people got too close to you by accident you could warn them so they could get away.

Maybe you're wondering, "Why would God do this?" Because this is a command, isn't it? God wanted this to happen. The Bible says the entire law can be summed up with loving God and loving neighbor. So, this is meant to be understood and practiced as an act of love. A person would be loving God and loving his neighbor by protecting them from leprous

disease and the uncleanliness that accompanied it. These laws are God's ways of optimizing human flourishing for as many people as possible. He desires his people to receive the blessing of being in his presence, but they must be pure and holy. Otherwise, God might just consume them.

Do you know why it sounds unloving (because it kind of does, doesn't it)? I think it sounds unloving because we know what we do with such people. What do humans do with those who are different? With those who are "dirty?" Those who might just "infect" others with what they've got? We have the tendencies to marginalize and ostracize. Our wicked heart is easily tempted into turning a procedure that is aimed for the communal good to be turned into a procedure to focus on personal good and shaming of others. We know our God. He enacts and ordains holy laws, good laws, laws that optimize human flourishing. We are the one tempted to point fingers, to feel self-righteous. We are the one's tempted to blame people for their misfortune; "I wonder what she did to be like that?" We are tempted to judge. We might even wonder, "Maybe this is God's punishment for their sins." And so we spin a command from God and sad reality of our broken world into a reason to exclude others and feel self-righteous.

Some of you are too young to remember this: as a boy growing up in the early 80's I remember learning about a new disease called AIDS. Nobody really knew much about AIDS. It was deadly; nobody could figure out a cure. It was linked to socially immoral behavior (like drug use and sexual activity). And you could catch it; it was contagious. I remember being afraid of catching it from people in my neighborhood who I suspected were "bad." And that was life in the 80's, wasn't it? People who had AIDS were unclean. "They were immoral. Maybe they even deserved it; maybe it was God's punishment for their behavior" some people thought. AIDS being linked to the homosexual community only enhanced these thoughts with people in the church. So, how do we keep those people away from us? How do we make sure we don't get infected like them?

In 1993, the movie *Philadelphia* was released. It was a very controversial film as it brought to light issues of discrimination related to homosexuality and AIDS; I'm still challenged when I watch it today. Its a story of a gay attorney who was fired from his position. His prestigious bosses suspected he had AIDS so they unlawfully fired him. And throughout the movie you're confronted with this dilemma that we're discussing today: What do you do with someone infected with AIDS? If you get too close, will you catch it? I have a clip for you this morning: Andy is in a public library struggling with the sickness that comes from AIDS. Notice how uncomfortable people are around him; notice how the librarian tries to isolate him away from others. He's unclean and they don't want to be unclean, too (VID).

Grab your Bibles again and turn to Luke 5 (READ vs. 12-16). Notice the description of this man's leprosy. He was full of leprosy. It covered his body from head to toe. This was not the kind of skin condition he could hide with long sleeves; you couldn't miss this man's problem. What did the man want? He wanted to be clean. Not healed; not well again, but

clean. Being unclean meant he lived isolated; being unclean meant he could not worship God in the temple. So, he begged Jesus, "Make me clean."

The question was not Jesus' ability, right? He wasn't wondering if Jesus possessed the power; he didn't question if Jesus had the authority. No, Jesus' ability was not the issue. Of course Jesus can make him clean. He's been performing miracle after miracle throughout Galilee. He's been rebuking demons and delivering the oppressed. What couldn't Jesus do? It was clear, Jesus could do anything.

But would he? Was Jesus willing to make this man clean? Would Jesus give him the time of day? Would Jesus alter his plans? And would Jesus dare risk becoming unclean himself? Would Jesus spend the necessary time to be with the unclean man? Or would Jesus avoid the man like everyone else avoided him? Would Jesus scatter when he hears the man's cries of, "Unclean! Unclean!" and when he saw that his leprosy was from his head to his feet?

Look at vs. 13, "And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.'" Again look at two points. First, Luke tells us that Jesus touched the man. That, friends, is huge. That's one of the main points of the cleanliness laws; these laws were put in place to keep people from coming into contact with that which was unclean. If you touch something that is unclean then you become unclean, too. And here's Jesus willing to extend his hand and touch an unclean man.

Secondly, and what I really want to emphasize, Jesus says he is willing. He will make the man clean, he will purify him. He will touch him and help him. So much of what Luke reports in these 5 verses has already been well established in previous passages. We've already seen Jesus heal sick people. Reports were already spreading. Like before, Jesus withdrew from the crowds to spend time in prayer.. So much of this feels redundant. What's new is that someone asks Jesus, "Are you willing?" and Jesus doesn't blink an eye; Jesus is so willing he reaches out and touches a man who is unclean and says, "I will, be clean."

Did you know this is what Jesus is like? Our Savior and Lord is willing. Yes, he can. But he will, too! Are you ever afraid to ask someone for something because you're afraid they'll say no? You're hopeful, you're excited. You know it's possible. But will they say yes? Here's what's so great about Jesus. He's willing. Jesus is always willing.

Some people struggle believing that God is willing; maybe you're one of them. "God would never forgive me; God would never help me. Look how much trouble I've caused; Why would God want to help someone like me?" All kinds of reasons, right? But he would; he is willing. He will forgive, he will heal. He does it in his way and in his time, but he's willing. You don't have to be afraid.

This is really good news for all of us. You see, we are all unclean. We are all dirty. That's why in 1 Cor. 6 Paul rejoices when he says, "But you were washed, you were

sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” Clean people don’t need to be washed; you wash dirty people. You wash people who are unclean. That’s why we see the word “impurity” throughout the OT and NT. We are impure, we are dirty. And it’s not just a select few; it’s all of us. Every human being needs the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. And Jesus is willing. Jesus provides this washing and cleansing. Yes, he provides cleansing for a leprous man, but he does so much more for every person who believe in him.

It’s so important for us to resist the temptation that so many are giving into in today’s cultural climate. The temptation is to minimize or even ignore our filth; to deny our impurity. Friends, that strategy is not of God. Look what Jesus did in 14 (READ). Jesus upholds the law for this leprous man. He doesn’t say his leprosy isn’t a problem; he doesn’t say that God’s purity laws aren’t that important. No, he upholds them and (even better) he satisfies them himself. Go to the priest, make your offering as Moses commanded. Satisfy God’s way. The good news is not that what we once thought was unclean really is clean; the good news is Jesus Christ make unclean, dirty people clean.

I used the AIDS and homosexuality illustration on purpose earlier in the sermon because it puts us in this dilemma. Churches all over this country are starting to redefine what’s clean and unclean. Rather than staying committed to the scriptures, churches, pastors and Christians are starting to buckle. It’s not uncommon for me to hear such-n-such pastor has changed his position on SSM. It’s happening. But the scriptures teach people sinning in homosexual sin need the same forgiving mercy, need the same gospel, need the same call to repentance as those sinning in heterosexual sin. We’re not a light to the community, we are not faithful to our master if we redefine God’s standards on anything including sexual purity. God hasn’t given us that authority, nor does he need us to do that. Let’s not buckle, FBC.

Yet, this issue forces us to confront our own self-righteousness. It forces us to confront our own fears and prejudices. Look at Jesus: reaching out and touching someone no one else would touch. I promise you: if we were with Jesus we might have said, “Jesus, don’t touch him! He’s unclean! Stay away!” And we’re tempted to do that. Rather than being an agent of grace and acceptance, we’re tempted to exclude and judge. But Jesus was willing (that mean’s he was happy) to make him clean. We should be like that, too. So how do we do that? How can we be like Jesus? I have two ideas.

First, we must be controlled by the love of Christ. 2 Cor. 5 says that when we are controlled by the love of Christ we no longer live for ourselves for God and his purposes. The only way you and I will offer ourselves up for others is if we are controlled by the love of Christ. When we live for ourselves we will never risk becoming unclean for other people. So, FBC, let’s clothe ourselves with compassion, with mercy, with sympathy. Let’s enter into the profane of our world with mercy and compassion knowing that Christ has made us clean. There will be many temptations to resist, but when we are controlled by the love of Christ we’ll be a purifying agent of God.

Secondly, we must share and tell others the gospel. The gospel being Jesus Christ has come to save sinners; Jesus Christ was crucified to reconcile us back to God. Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty of our sins and to break the power of sin in our lives. Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead proving he in fact accomplished all this work for us. That's how we are washed from our filth. Titus 3:5 says, "he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." That's the washing; when I am born again when I hear and respond to the call "Be reconciled to God!" My dear friends, don't think for one minute people are made clean by any other way. People are not made clean by better moral behavior; people are not made clean by not cussing so much; we don't make people clean by social justice programs and initiatives; our helping hands of compassion, as good and as necessary as they are, do not cleanse anyone.

So, let's keep telling people about the love of God. Let's do this with smiles on our faces and joy in our hearts. Jesus saves! And he will save you.

#### Questions for the week

- What sins or people in our culture might we be tempted to label "unclean?"
- What's most striking to you about Jesus' love and grace?
- How can you be an agent of mercy and purity to others?