

Mark 1:40-45

February 4, 2018

The most famous opening words of any book besides, “In the Beginning...” for my money is, from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. The book starts and describes the chaotic times of the French Revolution,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...”

The book is called *A Tale of Two Cities* but it is really a *Tale of Two Men*, Sidney Carton and Charles Darnay. In just the right light, they look the same.

The story takes too many twists and turns to catalogue here—but let’s be real—if you haven’t read it you probably never will. So, I’m going to give away the ending.

Carton spends the book lost in drink and mediocrity. Darnay was the opposite. He was devoted to his wife Lucie and his daughter. But in the chaotic times of the Revolution when the Guillotine was constantly falling—Darnay was charged with treason and sentenced to die.

And then the apathetic Carton spirits into the dungeon and takes the place of Darnay. Carton knocks Darnay out

and they change clothes and Carton takes the place of Darnay.

It is a story of two men—

One man liberated.

Another man was imprisoned.

One man was set free.

Another man was condemned.

One man received the blessing of life.

Another man received the curse of death.

In short,

They traded places.

As the cart rumbles to the guillotine a seamstress, condemned to die for plotting against the French Republic looks to Carton for a bit of strength,

As her patient eyes were lifted to his face, he saw a sudden doubt in them, and then astonishment. He pressed the work-worn, hunger-worn young fingers, and touched his lips.

“Are you dying for him?” she whispered.

“And his wife and child. Hush! Yes.”

“O you will let me hold your brave hand, stranger?”

“Hush! Yes, my poor sister; to the last.”

One man liberated.

Another man was imprisoned.

One man was set free.

Another man was condemned.

One man received the blessing of life.
Another man received the curse of death.

A Tale of Two Cities is a good story but today we are going to immerse ourselves in a better story.

By the end, we will see

One man liberated.
Another man imprisoned.
One man set free.
Another man condemned.
One man receive the blessing of life.
Another man receive the curse of death.

You might entitle today's sermon—A Tale of Two Men—A Leper and Our Lord.

Remember our purpose as we walk with Jesus through the book of Mark—We are going to pay attention to Jesus and what he does.

We are going to watch Jesus.
We are going to listen to Jesus.
We are going to follow him around and get to know him.

And today we see—Jesus is the King who takes the place of those marked by sin.

The King trades places with the corrupt.

“And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” ⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and

said to him, “I will; be clean.” ⁴² And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³ And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, ⁴⁴ and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” ⁴⁵ But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.” Mark 1:40-45

PRAY

A Tale of two men—A Leper and our Lord and the day they traded places.

Who was the Leper?

1. A Leper: A Societal Outcast (Mark 1:40)—

Leprosy was more death sentence than disease.

“(Leprosy) is not simply the description of an illness. It is a sentence, the purpose of which was to protect the health of the community from a dreaded contagion.” James Edwards

Someone branded a leper lost everything: family, friends, occupation, community, health and identity. In other words someone with leprosy ceased to be father/mother; uncle/aunt; friend/confidant; farmer/carpenter; grandmother/grandfather; and became a leper. To be branded a leper was to lose everything, not just your health.

Leprosy is a serious condition that ravages nerve endings in all of the extremities—fingers, toes, nose, ears, eyelids. The nerve endings are numbed you feel no more pain. So, you can be injured without knowing it and your skin picks up disfiguring sores.

Leprosy was more of a condition than a disease. When someone was branded leper, they were immediately exiled away from town off and out to the desolate places. Lepers were exiled from everything meaningful in life. To be diagnosed with leprosy meant that you were going to be sentenced to exile from everyone and everything that you knew and loved. Leprosy was an identity death sentence.

Rabbis at the time called Lepers ‘the walking dead.’

Lepers were exiled out past the edges of society. Though no one knew how the disease was spread, people branded a leper were shunned by society.

The pages of the Old Testament spoke directly on how to treat lepers,

“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ [46] He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp. Leviticus 13:45–46

The prescribed clothes put on the same clothes as the dress of a corpse. Imagine dressing yourself for your own funeral. Lepers did this.

There were worse diseases than leprosy—cancer, heart disease, leukemia—but no disease was feared like leprosy.

The leper lost everything before he died. He died to all he loved before he was put into the ground.

Not only did they have to deal with the indignity of dressing like the dead but they had to wander the countryside crying ‘Unclean, unclean.’

They had to remain 50 paces from non-lepers and shout ‘Unclean, unclean.’ In other words—do not come near to me because coming in contact with me will make you unclean. Stay away! Stay away! Stay away!

So the leper was sentenced to have children shriek and sprint away, upstanding citizens look away in revulsion and have polite society recoil at the sight of them.

So when Mark reports in verse 40, “**And a leper came to him...**” All of the original readers would have known that leper was violating every flavor of law and social norms. That man—should be shouting ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ but instead he comes to Jesus and asks to be made clean.

The exploits of Jesus was making the rounds even way out and into the leper colonies. The man who had healed so many at Capernaum and was now travelling from town to town in Galilee. What may have started as rumored whispers amongst the lepers about a man who could possibly cleanse them must have pushed lepers to desperately tumble about to find this Jesus of Nazareth.

We don't know for sure how this man heard of what Jesus of Nazareth could do, but he was determined that Jesus would hear from him.

The man who should have shouted, 'Unclean, unclean!' came to Jesus asked him to make him clean.

How would Jesus respond?

The action moves from the Leper to our Lord.

We've met the Leper—and now again we focus on our Lord. How would he respond to this man who should have stayed 50 paces away? Who instead of shouting "Unclean! Unclean!" implores him,

"If you will, you can make me clean."

Though the Leper did not know it—he was asking our Lord to trade places with him.

One man liberated.

Another man imprisoned.

One man set free.

Another man condemned.

One man receive the blessing of life.

Another man receive the curse of death.

2. Our Lord—A Cosmic Outcast (Mark 1:41-45)

What would Jesus do?

41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean."

Moved with pity does not do justice to what Mark is saying here. Jesus was troubled at the plight of this man all the way down to the core of his being.

And Jesus did the unthinkable.

‘He stretched out his hand and touched him...’ Original readers gasp at this point. It is the equivalent for us of something like drinking raw sewage. We go—yuck.

That is how the readers responded.

But Jesus did the unthinkable. He touched the man. I’m sure the disciples scattered like schoolchildren—saying, ‘Get away!’

Jesus did not shriek with fear, he did not turn his head in revulsion, he did not send him away—Jesus did something no one had do. This man KNEW rejection, loneliness, fear, solitude, hopelessness and constantly wandering the edges of insanity.

But had NOT known a kind touch from anyone—until the man from Nazareth stretched out and touched him.

Jesus just did the unthinkable—touching an unclean leper should make him unclean. That is what Leviticus says,

“If he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort his uncleanness may be with which he becomes unclean...he will be guilty.” Leviticus 5:3

Jesus just touched human uncleanness. He should have been guilty and unclean. That is the way it is. In our fallen world, it is easier to pass a contagion than a cure. A disease travels much faster than the antidote. Strep throat jumps from person to person.

We pass sickness without even trying through a cough, a sneeze or a touch.

Humanity does not naturally pass healing one to another.

But Jesus is different. He is the King inaugurating his Kingdom.

But remember who Jesus is. He is the Son of God. He is the Great Physician he is the Light of the World. In him was life and that life was and is the light of men and women the world over.

A touch from Jesus does not spread disease but spreads the cure. Jesus is the great harbinger of the kingdom of God. He is bringing the good news of the kingdom of God to the dark kingdom of man. King Jesus is forcefully invading the realm of the evil one and bringing life.

Instead of becoming unclean, Mark tells us what happens in verse 42,

“And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.”

Jesus did not become ritually unclean, he made the leper a leper no longer. With a touch, Jesus cleansed an untouchable.

Not only did he cleanse the leper, but even more powerfully he traded places with the leper. This is a tale of two men—Jesus and a leper and how they traded places.

When Jesus touched the man he was saying with his actions,

“I am prepared to become by choice, what you are by nature—a man under judgment of the law—in order to share with you what I have—freedom and life.” Sinclair Ferguson

Jesus was prepared to trade places with this lonely leper—to trade places with the man who was unclean and rejected.

One man liberated.

Another man imprisoned.

One man set free.

Another man condemned.

One man receive the blessing of life.

Another man receive the curse of death.

How?

At the beginning of the section we meet the leper who was shunned out past the edges of town and worse, society and Jesus was freely moving about Galilee, preaching, healing, blessing...

But then verse 45 makes clear the two trade places, Jesus told the man not to tell others,

“But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.” Mark 1:45

The former leper was once sentenced to the desolate places entered the town and spread the news of this Jesus. Jesus traded places with him. He could no longer enter a town, but he was sentenced to the desolate places.

Jesus had implored him not to tell a soul but to present himself to the priest as Leviticus commanded but instead he presented himself in town after town spreading the news of what Jesus had done for him.

No longer did he wander the outskirts of the community shouting ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ but he spread the news—I’m sure shouting, “Jesus made me clean!” “I was unclean and Jesus made me clean.”

Instead of children shrieking, upstanding citizen look away and polite society recoil, Jesus restored one that was unclean back to his identity.

He was a leper and became a father again.

He was a leper and became a husband again.

He was a leper and Jesus made him a brother again.

He was a leper and Jesus made him an uncle again.

The leper had his occupation back.

He was a leper and with a touch Jesus gave him his identity again.

How? Jesus traded places with him.

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Another man imprisoned.
One man set free.
Another man condemned.
One man receive the blessing of life.
Another man receive the curse of death.

Everything he was meant to be and more was restored to this man. He was a leper no more. He was no longer going to be a menace to society but a member of that society.

And Jesus became an outcast of sorts from society. Mark is doing more than giving us a story of a miracle story. He is trying to do more than have us say, "Well isn't that nice what Jesus there healing poor lepers."

No. Mark reports his exploits not just to show what Jesus can do but to show us who he is. His miracles are signs. What does this sign say about Jesus?

Jesus trades places with the unclean.

Jesus is demonstrating the power of his kingdom but also how the kingdom power comes to men and women, boys and girls.

How?

The King trades places with the corrupt.

Jesus identifies and trades places with the unclean. Jesus came from the skies above to the earth below to cleanse the unclean.

None of us in this room are fighting against the physical and emotional effects of leprosy—but all of us in this room are struggling with the effects of something much more rancorous than a skin disease.

Sin.

Everyone one of us is born unclean. We need no training to hurt others, be selfish or lash out. We are born unclean, experts in all different facets of sin.

Maybe you are here and you are not sure that people (or you) are all that bad—realize I am not saying everyone is as bad as they could be—but that all fall short. We all believe and say—no one is perfect, or I'm only human.

Another way to say the same thing is we are marked by the leprous effects of sin. We are each unclean. The reason we don't often feel unclean is because we live in colonies of unclean people. All are sinners and falls short.

We are among all of those people who are the walking dead, we are all naturally spiritually dead because of the leprosy of sin. We live with others outside the Garden of Eden, outside the city of God, away from the presence of God most high.

Mankind is born with a death sentence on his head.

That is why Jesus of Nazareth came. Before he came from Nazareth he came from beyond the skies. He came not to instruct mankind one how to get clean, but to cleanse us from unrighteousness.

What he does for the Leper he offers to any who come to him and says, “If you will, you can make me clean.”

And he always says, “I will; be clean.”

One man liberated.

Another man imprisoned.

One man set free.

Another man condemned.

One man receive the blessing of life.

Another man receive the curse of death.

Jesus the King trades places with the foulest.

Do you know how he made us clean? By trading places with us. That is what Galatians 3 says,

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...” Galatians 3:13

In other words he cleanses the unclean by becoming unclean for them.

The one who is able to cleanse the leper is able to cleanse us from something far more serious—the leprous effects of sin. He did this by trading places with us.

The sentence of death for sin need not be meted out on us—because Jesus takes our place.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

We were indicted by the sentence of sin, but Jesus was executed in our place. Or he was if you have come to him and said, “If you will, you can make me clean.”

If you are a follower of Jesus he has made you clean.

If you are not a follower of Jesus he can make you clean. The best thing for you this morning is to realize that you need to be cleansed.

That you reside in a leper colony, unclean.

Do you know this?

Maybe you feel the constant biting concern that you don't and can't measure up. That nothing you do is good enough. Some of you try harder and others of you say, “Why try?”

Jesus offers something better than....
Jesus cleanses those that don't measure up.

Maybe you feel the sting of the regret of so many bad choices in the past. You look back on your life and you would change so many things. You would give anything to go back and do it over.

Jesus offers something better than a second chance—he offers a new life.

He can take your place too.

Maybe you know you are no good and you are desperate hoping that someone out there can hear you and help you.

You lay awake at night knowing something is not right—
not just out there in the world—but in you. The world is
not as it should be, and when you are honest you know you
aren't either.

Jesus offers something better than

He can take your place too.

Christians—

He has taken your place.

Who you were is not who you are. What Jesus has done for
this leper, he has done something better for you. He
promises to make the foulest clean. He has touched you—
remember though you are convicted sin again and again—
you are not unclean, not anymore.

Why?

The King trades places with the corrupt.

Isaiah describes our Lord nearly like a Leper—

“He 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.

[4] Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

[5] But he was pierced for our transgressions;

he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
[6] All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah 53:3–6

We were more unclean than any Leper but the King has taken the place of the corrupt.

One man liberated.
Another man imprisoned.
One man set free.
Another man condemned.
One man receive the blessing of life.
Another man receive the curse of death.

The King takes the place of the corrupt.

What does this mean?

Christian—The King has already traded places with you—

You might be here and be thinking—I don't feel very cleansed. I feel dirty. If you only knew, if you followed me around this week you would see someone who does not look very clean.

You would say—this week—I had such trouble. If you followed me around—

- The words you said
- The words you didn't say

- The websites you visited
- The people you tried to control
- The time you have wasted

I feel dirty.

I understand. I really do.

But what I want you to understand something about the cleansing that Jesus brings. The King takes the place of the corrupt.

Because the King takes the place of the corrupt you can rest assured that you can go again to him for forgiveness, for cleansing. You can say—make me clean again.

The reason you can do this is because the King has already taken your place. Mark does not end his story about our Lord here in the desolate places of Galilee.

We will follow him all the way to a desolate place outside the walls of Jerusalem. There the King will hang and die and there in that spot you can know he has taken your places.

All the sins you have committed. All the moral filth that you feel. All the unworthiness that piles up on you—all of that sin has been paid for.

The King has already died for the corrupt.

The sin, the corruption that is needling at your conscience right now is paid for. It has already been put on him. He

has already carried your sin and died for that bit of corruption.

It is finished.

You ARE liberated.

Because he was imprisoned.

You ARE set free.

Because he was condemned.

You have received the blessing of life.

Because he received the curse of death.

Not following Jesus?

Only Jesus can make you clean—

Jesus does not ask you to improve yourself or obey a bit better or mix in a few prayers or do a little more.

None of that works. You need a cleansing that is more than just skin deep. You might be able to change a habit or two, but that does not and cannot change who you are.

Jesus offers you a new cleansed life—come to him and ask—If you will, you can make me clean.

He always says, “I will, be clean.”

Always.

The King trades places with the corrupt.

So we might be liberated.

He was imprisoned.

We are set free.
He was condemned.
We have the blessing of life.
He received the curse of death.

PRAY

[20] Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, [21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20–21

