

"I Am Willing; Be Cleansed"

A Sermon by Rev. David C. Roth

"And behold, a leper came and worshipped Him saying, 'Lord if You are willing, You can make me clean.' Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed" (Matthew 8:2,3)

They say the days of miracles are over. But are the days of miracles really over? Is everything that happens nowadays completely ordinary and unmiraculous? The opinion that those days are gone is one which is hard to accept when we think of the many examples of miracles in each of our own lifetimes. For example, the miracle of birth, or the miracle that two people are able to find each other among billions and fall in love; that they are able to achieve conjugal love that true marriage love between one man and one woman, a love that is so rare, so precious. Or how about the miracle which we all hope for ourselves the miracle of being transformed from a spiritually dead person into a spiritually alive and prosperous angel for eternity; the miracle of reformation and regeneration? When we consider some of our past or present evil and selfish states, it would seem to have to take a miracle to truly change us, to heal us of our spiritual diseases.

We read of a man who was healed of a disease by the Lord. The man had leprosy. Leprosy is a chronic skin disease wherein the skin slowly dies and rots away. The person suffering from this disease experiences severe pain, for his flesh is literally rotting and falling off. As you can imagine, a person suffering from leprosy was usually of hideous appearance, and was unclean to be around, let alone to touch. Lepers were cast out of society and often sent to dwell in caves and tombs. In our story the Lord had just finished preaching His sermon on the mount, and as He came down the mountain He was approached by this leper. The leper came up to Him and worshipped Him saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." The Lord willingly replied to the leper's request, and gave him a healing touch that made him clean that very instant.

Does this story teach us that the Lord had the power to heal people of their diseases? Yes it does, but more than that it teaches of how the Lord can heal each one of us of our own spiritual diseases, those destructive tendencies or actual evils we are involved in which lead us

away from loving God and our fellow man, and cause us to love and serve only ourselves. It tells of the miracle of how our spiritually fallen condition can be repaired and raised up by the Lord. This is so important for us because left untreated, spiritual diseases are evils which will destroy our willing for good or desire to strive after what is good and right, and they are also falsities which will destroy our capacity to understand truth (see AC 8364).

The Writings for the New Church teach that one who is leprous corresponds to a person who is involved in profanation; that is, someone who knows the teachings and truths of the Lord's Word and doesn't live according to them. How many of us have spiritual leprosy, or have had times when we were in a leprous state? We may not be completely spiritually leprous, but it is certain that we have times when we play the role of the leper when we know the truth which the Lord's Word teaches and we just don't follow it; instead we steal, we lie, we commit adultery, we bear false witness, we covet our neighbors' possessions, we kill our neighbor. We can do any of these things in little ways, or maybe even in large ways, even when we know that they're wrong. It would be a complete lie to say we are not aware of the truths that teach against these things. We know the truth; at the least, we know the Ten Commandments. But do we live them? And if we don't, can we change for the better? Can we begin to live, to really live, according to them? The answer is yes if we want to, if we are willing.

While on earth, the Lord healed hundreds, maybe thousands, of people of their various diseases. We are taught in the Writings that, "By the diseases which the Lord healed is signified liberation from various kinds of evil and falsity which infested the church and the human race, and which would have led to spiritual death" (AC 8364). This holds true for today. If we don't live according to the truths of the Lord's Word, then we will die spiritually. So if we do know the truth, what is preventing us from living it? Like the leper, if we want to change our condition we are going to have to actively seek out the Lord to help us. It will not happen by chance or wishful thinking.

But where do we find the Lord? In our story the Lord just came down the mountain. What this means for us is that the Lord is the Word the Word made flesh. And the Lord has given us this Word. It has come down to us from God. The Lord has accommodated Himself to us in His Word. He has in effect descended from His holy habitation to guide our mortal steps on this earth. He has given us His Word so that we can be healed.

And it is by means of the truths and goods of His Word that we can dispel the falsities and evils in our lives. He has shown us the way, and there is no other.

We know we can find the Lord in His Word, but we need to cultivate a belief that He is really there and that He can help us. Perhaps we are just like the leper. We know the truth but we just can't seem to live it. We long for the Lord's help, and we just can't seem to beat the evil we are fighting to resist in our lives. We try and try, and fail and fail. What's missing? How do we overcome our own weaknesses? What did the leper do? By following the story of the healing of the leper in the spiritual sense we are taught what we can do.

In our text the leper approached the Lord, worshipping Him. This represents humiliation on the part of the individual, the humbling of ourselves before the Lord by asking for His help. The Lord does not ask this for His own glory, but for the sake of ourselves. We need to humble ourselves. Like Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, we too easily make ourselves out to be the masters of our lives, and even of the lives of others. We too often give ourselves the credit when it is due the Lord.

The Lord gave us a commandment about our tendencies to make ourselves our own God: we shall have no other gods before His face. We need to remember His words, "Without Me you can do nothing." We need to develop faith in Him and His power. This can be a hard lesson to learn, as it was for Naaman, but we need to learn to humble ourselves in order to approach the Lord.

The leper and many others were healed by the Lord according to their faith, that is, according to whether or not they thought He was God Almighty. Like Jesus' words to the centurion and the blind men, "As you have believed, so let it be done for you." And, "According to your faith let it be to you." It was because they had faith in the Lord that they were able to be healed. We too must believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is God, the one true God, and that it is He alone who can help us. And then we must respond by living according to His Word. As the Writings strongly teach, "The faith by which spiritual diseases are healed by the Lord can be given only through truths from the Word and a life according to them" (AE 815).

Now we approach the Lord's Word, or the Lord Himself, in our prayers. But at such times we tend to approach very meekly because we feel that He has no time for us no time for somebody who keeps messing things up, no patience for our inability to resist temptation time and time again. We doubt whether He is willing even to listen, let alone help us, at this point. Like the leper, we pray, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

This kind of humility is okay, but what we are thinking is simply not true. If we make a point of asking the Lord for His help, He will give it no doubt about it. But we have to have faith that He can do it; otherwise it will not happen. As the Lord said, "All things whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22, emphasis added). When we ask the Lord in prayer with an earnest heart desiring to change, we will get the same response as the leper. He will put out His hand and touch us saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." The Lord will immediately heal us of our spiritual disease.

But what does it mean to us to be healed? Is it a one-shot "I believe" solution, and wham! we are clean? It does mean that the Lord has forgiven us of our evils and falsities, and will hold us in good if we desire it. And this is cause for joy. As Jesus said to the paralytic whose sins He forgave, "Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."

But at this point we are not really clean. We are not truly purified of our evils unless we follow up what the Lord has done for us by changing our lives stop indulging in our destructive evil thoughts, intentions, and actions, and begin living a life of charity, a life of service to the Lord and each other. We are taught that the Lord immediately forgives man of his sins because He is mercy itself. But in essence this does nothing for us unless we respond. The Lord is always forgiving us no matter what we do, but He might as well not forgive us if we don't stop doing what is wrong. Unless we perform serious repentance, which means to stop, to really stop, doing evil, His forgiveness will do nothing to affect our salvation. Fortunately, the Lord does teach us what we need to do now that we have been pronounced clean. As He told the leper, "See that you tell no one." He tells us the same thing. When we are forgiven, we need to continue to acknowledge that the Lord is our strength and not we ourselves. It's an affirmation. We acknowledge the Lord's strength in our own minds and hearts by thinking and reflecting on what He has done for us thinking that it was not something that a mortal, finite being could have accomplished. No one person could have performed this

miracle except the Lord. He teaches us to do this so that our faith and our confidence in Him grow.

The next thing the leper was instructed to do was to "go your way." Go your way. We are told that we are to get going on our new life. The word "go" is a word of action, a word telling us to start living the life the Word teaches progress into those things that are of good, of life, and leave our former life; depart from "our old way." The Lord is the way, the truth and the life. He is the good shepherd; we are not "the way." Our old life, the life of evil and falsity, is to be cast aside and abandoned. For example, we must leave the attitude that wants to look for the faults in others so that we can ridicule them and thence exalt ourselves. We must then adopt an attitude that looks for the good in others so that we can be of service to it; or leave the destructive life of casual sexual relations or indulgence in pornography and strive for that precious jewel of human life that pure marriage love between one man and one woman.

After this the Lord tells us to "show ourselves to the priest." We are now to make manifest our changed condition by producing fruits worthy of repentance. We show ourselves as changed before the priest, thus before the Lord, by living according to what He has taught us. We begin a new life that seeks to do good to our neighbor and the Lord. We begin the life of charity, one day at a time, step by step. After we have shown ourselves, that is, we have begun to change our lives, we are then to "offer the gift that Moses commanded as a testimony to them." The last thing we are asked to do is offer this gift which Moses commanded. Moses represents the Word, so that doing what Moses commanded is doing what the Lord teaches in His Word. By offering a gift is signified our living in the faith and good of love which the Word teaches, and working on learning more truths, taking one at a time, and attempting to make it permanent and fixed by living it. Living truth is doing good. We know what the Lord wants us to do. We know it so clearly, but until we start doing it we will have no power to keep in the way of the Lord no power to remain in a good state. When we offer the gift Moses commanded, we are offering up our new life as a testimony to the Lord's healing power. By living the life the Word teaches we are confessing our faith in the Lord. It is a confession from the heart that the Lord is Divine. He is the Divine Human who has all power to heal all diseases and to comfort all pain. The only confession of faith we can make which is

actual is the confession shown by a life according to His Word. If we didn't believe in the Lord we simply would not obey His voice.

We must remember that the Lord is always willing to make us clean. He is forever willing to forgive us our trespasses. But note the words of the Lord's prayer which we daily ask: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." To the degree that we are willing to stop our evil and turn to good, to the same degree the Lord's forgiveness will make us whole.

The days of miracles are not over. They are over only if we let them be. The Lord will perform His miracle of healing our spiritual disease if we earnestly ask Him, and truly wish it for ourselves, knowing that it is what He wants. If we are diseased spiritually, if we are in trouble and desire the Lord's help, we must come before Him in prayer and ask, "Lord, if you are willing, You can make me clean." We know His response and we know the immediate outcome. "I am willing; be cleansed." Amen.

Lessons: II Kings 5:1-15; Matthew 8:1-17; AC 9014