

# Touching the Untouchable

*Master Teacher, Part 5, May 28, 2017*

A few years ago, I was attending an evening service at a Vineyard in Arizona where my friend, Robby, was the main speaker.

- And, pretty much out of nowhere, he asked if I'd come up to do some ministry.
- Since he asked me publically to come up I couldn't really say no, so off I went to the podium.

But God quickly gave me a word of knowledge that there was **someone whose hands and wrists** were in pain.

- Now, I'll tell you... it gets a bit scary when you put yourself out there like that.
- But, a woman immediately raised her hand. So, I invited her up so I could have her share her story... and so I could pray for her.

She shared with everyone how she had recently lost her job as a dental assistant because she couldn't hold even the lightest instrument for any amount of time.

- She had been to various doctors... and **surgery seemed to be the only option** for her...
- but, because it was **related to damaged nerves**, they couldn't make any promises.

**Before I prayed for her, I had her squeeze my hand** as hard as she could. And, as you can imagine... I could hardly feel her grip.

- Well, the Good News is that God healed her!
- I then invited some other people up front and **asked HER to pray for them...** and those people were healed as well.

Well, as I was leaving at the end of the night, **a man came up to me** and gave me a big hug.

- He told me about a really strange experience he had just had a little while earlier when **some woman started giving him a massage** on his shoulders and neck.
- It was one of those massages that was a little too hard to be comfortable.

As a good husband, he **quickly turned around** to tell this woman to stop (I mean, he was married)...

- but it turned out to be his wife... the woman whose hands/wrists were just healed!
- He told me that it had been three years since his wife was able to give him a massage. Let's just say, he was happy!!
- Truth is, **that couple had an encounter with Jesus** that night that they'll never forget.

Of course, the New Testament is full of far more incredible stories than that... **stories of people who had encountered Jesus.**

- Now, I'm **not talking about the kind of encounter where someone might go home and say, "I ran into an interesting guy today."**
- Instead, it was clear to these people that **they had just met someone unlike anyone** they had ever met before.

Some were **overjoyed**... others were **frightened**. Some become **angry**... while others experienced **unspeakable love and acceptance**...

- Some **chose to follow** Him... others **chose to walk away**.
- But **all of them were changed**.
- Well, this morning, I'd like to look at just one of these stories.
- So, if you're with me, go ahead and turn to the **Gospel of Mark, chapter 1:40-45**.

*A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean," he said. <sup>41</sup>Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" <sup>42</sup>Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed. <sup>43</sup>Then Jesus sent him on his way with a stern warning: <sup>44</sup>"Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed." <sup>45</sup>But the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened. As a result, large crowds soon surrounded Jesus, and he couldn't publicly enter a town anywhere.*

*He had to stay out in the secluded places, but people from everywhere kept coming to him. [PRAYER]*

You know, when I was growing up, the most dreaded disease in my little world wasn't the **measles** or **mumps** or **chicken pox**.

- It was a more subtle & mysterious disorder than any of those.
- In fact, there was **no vaccine** for it, **no antidote**, and **no known cure**.
- There was **no method of inoculation** and it was **highly contagious**.
- And even though I knew how you could contract this disease, **no one ever told me** what would actually happen to you if got it.

And so, **as a six-year-old boy**, the mere mention of this particular disease was enough to strike terror in me & my friends.

- It was a **fate worse than death**. The **only way to be safe** was to **stay away as far as you could** from those who had it.
- Fortunately, the carriers were easy to recognize **since the disease was carried by girls**.
- In fact, **every girl except my mother** was loaded with it.
- The **name of this disease was "cooties"** -- the dreaded cooties disease.

All a carrier had to do was **touch you** or **breathe** on you or **look** at you real hard, and you would be infected.

- It was like **every carrier wore a big sign** that said, "Don't touch."
- Needless to say, **there would come a time** when all young boys would care less about cooties... even if it were real!
- But, **until then, for a little while...** girls served as the "Untouchables" of any boy's youth.

Of course, the sad thing is that, in reality, there really are those whom some consider *untouchable*.

- There was an article some time ago in 'The Economist' that spoke of a young lady from the northern **Indian state of Bahar...**
- who had **eloped with a young man** from the lowest caste of society referred to as the Untouchables.

The problem was that **she was of a higher caste**.

- And so, the village council decided that the girl should be whipped and branded with a burning log...
- While **the boy should be severely beaten with stones...** for even daring to touch a girl outside his own caste.

The terrible reality in our world is that every society is filled with those considered to be untouchable...

- people who, because of their **race**, their **socioeconomic status**, their **language** or **background**, or their **physical appearance**, are placed at the lowest rung of the ladder.
- The truth is that **in certain times or in certain settings**, a number of you here may have experienced a little of how it feels like to be untouchable...
- **to be an unloved, unacceptable, unworthy** outsider.

Well, that's just how the man in our passage this morning felt **as he came before Jesus as the ultimate "untouchable"**... a man with leprosy.

- As you can imagine, having leprosy in Jesus' day was worse than a death sentence...
- because, **beyond the unspeakable disfiguration**, was the **excruciating isolation** that would inevitably follow.

Just listen to what the Book of **Leviticus 13:45-46**, says about people with leprosy:

- ***"Those who suffer from a leprous condition must tear their clothing and leave their hair uncombed. (They wouldn't let you have even the semblance of normalcy)***
- *They must cover their mouth and call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'*  
*<sup>46</sup>As long as the serious disease lasts, they will be ceremonially unclean. They must live in isolation in their place outside the camp."*
- And so, **the rabbis took passages like this** and developed what they called the **strategy of isolation**.

In other words, if a leper came into somebody's house in Jesus' day, for

example, then the house was deemed to be unclean.

- The **house could be destroyed** just because the leper had been inside of it.
- If you went so far as to touch a leper, you were defiled. You were ceremonially unclean.
- Truth is, **if a leper was even seen on the streets** in Jesus' day, he or she could be pelted with eggs or could even be stoned.

And so, just imagine what this man's life was like. Could you even imagine never being touched again for the rest of your life...

- **never to feel the hug of a little child**, never to feel a **friend** reach out for your hand...
- Never to have a **parent** put an arm around your shoulder... to never again to know the embrace of your spouse.
- The law was very clear. **Don't touch.**

**Mother Theresa** once said, *“We have drugs for people with diseases for leprosy, but these drugs do not treat the main problem, the disease of being unwanted... The sick and poor suffer even more from rejection than material want. Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty”*

What worse is that along with the horrific physical pain & emotional isolation...

- *the leper* would also experience an almost unimaginable **social stigma that considered them to be cursed of God.**
- You see, in that culture, leprosy was unlike most other diseases.

When people would contract other sicknesses... they needed to be healed.

- **But** lepers needed more than a cure... **they needed to be cleansed.**
- In other words, **lepers weren't just sick...** they were **unclean...** **they were defiled.**

**In contrast to the lepers were the Rabbis...** who purposed to live so **“purely” that they'd** never go anywhere near that kind of uncleanness.

- That's why the leper in this story doesn't just walk up to Jesus.

- If you look back to **Mark 1:40**, it says, that **"A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed."**
- Mark paints this picture very carefully here... He wants us to understand the desperate urgency of this man's request.

So, this man with leprosy comes to Jesus and falls to his knees... begging, pleading with Him.

- He says to Jesus, **"If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean."**
- He says it this way because he's knows he's just violated the law, which requires him to stay outside the community.

He knows that **nearly any rabbi at that point** would have already had him beaten with stones.

- It was the **desperate act of a dying man** who has nowhere else to turn and nothing else to lose.
- It's interesting because **a few chapters later** in the Book of Mark, we're told about the father of a demon-possessed boy who comes to Jesus.

The father says to Jesus, *"If you're able, would you heal my son."*

- But here, the leper has no doubt about Jesus' power. He doesn't say, *"If you're able to,"* He says, *"If you're willing to."*
- Again... this man comes desperately to Jesus... believing in His authority... and yet, he comes with a **deep sense of shame**, a **deep sense of his own unworthiness**.

**He's not supposed to be there...** he knows that. And why? Because, he's unclean.

- So, he says *"If you're willing, Jesus... if by some inexplicable twist of fate, you would want to help a leper... than I beg you..."*
- The big question is... **how would Jesus respond to him?** Again... the law is very clear. The **law says, "Don't touch!"**
- It's why the religious leaders chose that strategy of isolation...

That's why, in the **story of the Good Samaritan**, the Rabbi walked right past the man on the road.

- You see, the Rabbi **couldn't risk coming in contact with he**

**injured man's wounds**... or even worse, laying his hand upon a dead man.

- All those things would make him ceremonially unclean. And so, they would stay away.
- **Lepers, Gentiles, tax collectors**, the **uncircumcised**... **even women** outside their immediate family... The **rule** was: don't touch anybody.

Many devout rabbis would not even talk to a woman for fear of something inappropriate happening as a result of it.

- In fact, there was actually a group of rabbis (I'm not making this up) who were called the "**bruised and bleeding rabbis**,"
- because if they saw a woman, even out of their peripheral vision, they would close their eyes until they were sure she had passed out of their sight.
- They were **forever bumping into trees or falling off curbs**, so they were literally called the "bruised and bleeding rabbis."

So, if they went to that extent to avoid a woman, can you imagine how they'd respond to a leper.

- The idea here is that **sin & suffering are contagious**.
- And so, the way to avoid these things was to separate yourself from the people and the places where **sin** and **suffering** happen... to live in a kind of spiritual quarantine.

In a strange way, I think, to some degree, we can understand the appeal of this strategy of isolation...

- **because the truth about sin** is that... it is contagious! It is infectious.
- Get around people who complain a lot and what do you find yourself tending to do?

And yet, **what we're reminded of** here in this story is Jesus' declaration that **God has forever rejected this strategy of isolation**.

But there are two other things... **two miracles that I want us to get a hold of as we read this story.**

- Now, remember, **in terms of their place in society**, the leper's

job was to **avoid all people**, especially rabbis.

- Because if he didn't, he knows he could get pelted with stones for breaking the law.
- And so, a rabbi was the last person a leper would ever want to see.

In fact, there was a sense in which the rabbis in Jesus' day **prided themselves** on being unapproachable.

- They thought of themselves as being so close to God that common sinners... let alone lepers... should not be allowed to get too close to them.
- And yet, there was **one rabbi the leper could approach...** One that **seemed to possess something** no other rabbi seemed to have.

But this Rabbi wasn't only approachable to lepers... but to all kinds of **sinners**, **prostitutes**, **tax collectors** and **Gentile pagans**.

- It didn't matter to him who you were or what you had. You see, here's the difference.
- **The more religious the rabbis became**, the more unapproachable they were.
- And, the more unapproachable they were, the more **"holy"** they thought they thought they were becoming.

And yet Jesus... **the Rabbi** who loved us with an everlasting love... **the Rabbi** who gave His life for us so we can live forever in the Father's presence...

- Was **never anything less that entirely approachable.**
- **For me, that's the first miracle of this story... the miracle of Jesus' approachability.**
- What Jesus teaches us is that **true spirituality makes you MORE approachable**, not less approachable to the world around you.
- That's why one of our core values here as a church is to be a refuge... **not a refuge FROM the world...** but **FOR** the world.

In my own life... I want to ask the question... *"Am I becoming more approachable or less approachable to the world around me?"* What

about you?

If you've ever been to **Disneyworld**, they have this place where lines of kids wait for their favorite characters to come out...

- where they can get that prized picture... but even more important, that big hug!
- When we last went, **Sarah was into Goofy**... She got so excited when he came out to say hello.

**“Monsters, Inc.”** was still big at that time. So when **Sulley & Mike** came out... you know, the big blue monster and his one-eyed companion...

- Rebecca ran over to them to get a big hug for herself. They were so excited!
- Finally the **young & handsome Prince Charming** came out... and suddenly, Joyce starts jumping up and down...
- and then runs up to him for a big hug. It was actually a strange moment!

You see, Jesus came, in part, to reveal that **the very God whom people may have thought was so unapproachable**... was, in fact, the ultimate “hugger!”

- That he was completely approachable... even to those who seem so far off from Him.
- It's why **our heart as a church** has always been to **create a place where people can experience the authenticity and approachability of God**... even in their weakness and brokenness.

Jesus, who was perfect, **found sinners coming out of the woodwork** just to experience His loving embrace.

- In Jesus' day, if a prostitute had saw a rabbi walking toward them from a distance, they would have immediately ran the other way.
- **But what is about this Rabbi that caused them to run to Him?**

The **religious leaders** had the kind of superficial differentness that pushed people away.

- You see, **JESUS** had the kind of profound different-ness that drew sinners to him in ways people had never seen before.

- You don't have to turn to it, but in Mark, **chapter 10:13-16**, for example, we're told about some little children coming up to Jesus.

This is what Mark says: *"One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them."*

- But then look at what happens... we're told that *"the disciples scolded the parents for bothering Him."*
- For His disciples, **these kids were way too low on the status totem pole** to have that kind of "audience" with Jesus.

But when Jesus sees what they've just done, we told in **verse 14** that He became angry with them...

- and told them to *"**Let the children come to Me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children.**"*
- Jesus speaks to people and says, *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

Jesus **not only welcomes** those who come to Him... **but invites us to come**. In a way, ***He's waiting*** for us to approach Him.

- Maybe some of have kept your distance... because, for whatever reason, **you feel like you don't deserve** to approach him.
- Maybe you haven't approached Jesus because all the distractions in life **made you forget that He's even there**.

You see, **Jesus never stops inviting us** to do what even that leper was able to do. He's inviting us to **lay down the barriers and run to Him...**

- To climb on His lap with all your **struggles** and **doubts** and **fears**;
- asking Him to **hear** you, to **cleanse** you, to **empower** you, to **touch** you.
- So often we think, *"I've got to get cleaned up first. Then I can come to Jesus. I've got to get rid of my leprosy first... Once I pull my spiritual life together a bit... then I'll come to Jesus"*

We say, *"I've got some problem that I have to take care of" or "I've got to defeat sin in some area in my life. Then I'll be able to approach him."*

- But over and over again, Jesus offers His invitation to us to “come to Him.”
- **“Come to Me,”** Jesus said, *“all of you who are weary and burdened down by life... (Mt 11:28).”*

To the **chief tax collector, Zacchaeus**, hated by the people... hiding from Jesus behind some branches,

- *Jesus says, “Come down, for today I must come to your house.”*
- To a group of **rough-around-the-edges fishermen**, Jesus says, *“Come and follow Me! (Mk 1:17)”*
- This is the **miracle of his approachability**.

But then there is a **second miracle**. You see, it’s more than His just being approachable.

- Remember, this guy comes running to Jesus... and yet, the law is very clear.
- The law says, *“Don't touch. Don't go near this guy with a ten-foot pole.”*
- For so long, **all this leper has seen in anyone's eyes is disgust and repulsion**.
- And yet, He looks into Jesus' eyes... and, in **verse 41**, we’re told that, *“Jesus was moved with compassion.”*

Then **Jesus does this amazing thing**. Let’s read this again... *“A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed.”*

- *“‘If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean,’ he said.*
- ***<sup>41</sup>Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be healed!’”***
- But here’s **what’s amazed me...** in this encounter between Jesus and this leper, **which comes first**, the touching or the healing?
- It's the touching. You see, Jesus could have done it either way.

He had the power. He could have healed him immediately, and then touched him... and then embraced him.

- And by doing this, Jesus could have avoided any kind of trouble with the religious leaders.
- But He chose to **touch... to first embrace** the leper... before He

heals him... while he's still unclean.

- The significance of *this* miracle... *the miracle of His embrace...* is that Jesus is *not only* willing...
- but **wanting to share another person's suffering** in order to bring about healing.

Truth is, there probably was another way Jesus could have healed you and I of our sin. But **He chose to come** into this world...

- to become as one of us **taking our sin**, our **punishment**, our **death on His own back**... so that we could **take on His life**.
- In our sin, in all our imperfection, **He didn't demand that we live outside of town.**
- He didn't demand **that we cry out 'unclean!'**
- Instead, He died for us... taking on our sin & infirmities so that we can **experience for ourselves the incredible reality** of His love and nearness!

Truth is, we do live in a world where **sin** & **suffering** and even **pain** is all around us.

- And so, **we learn to keep our distance**... protecting ourselves from being inflicted by the pain and suffering of others.
- I mentioned a story not so long ago about Rebecca and I in an upscale gift shop in St. Petersburg, Russia.
- She was less than a year old... and I had her in one of those backpack things.

The problem was that I kept forgetting that she was back there. I came an inch away from knocking down a dozen glass shelves!

- Now I probably should've seen those **countless "Do Not Touch" signs** as a reminder that I probably shouldn't even be in there...
- but I was determined not to be the proverbial "bull in the china shop."

And yet every day we live our lives, it's as if you and I are walking through God's most precious shop.

- It's a shop filled with all kinds of **items of inexpressible value** –
- priceless items that are more precious to God than we'll ever know.

Back in 1994, during our first year in Tajikistan, I traveled about an hour south of the capital to the ancient town of Hisor,

- Where there was a small leper colony with 16 people diagnosed with leprosy (known today as Hansen's disease)
- I don't know if I've ever ministered to a group of people who were as excited and happy as they were.

They were **alone & isolated**... most were **abandoned & rejected**. What a blessing it was to love on them.

- You see, every person "out there" has a price tag... **lepers** and **AIDS** patients, **children**, **elderly**, **single & married**, **immigrants**... the disabled... **saints & sinners**.
- And about all of them, God says, "*He or she has inexpressible worth... they are even worth the life of my Son.*"

In God's shop, there are countless signs... signs that say, "*Please touch, please welcome, please embrace, please love.*"

- But I know this can be hard for us... **to carry someone else's pain and struggles**...
- especially when the burdens we carry for our own lives and our own families seems overwhelming in themselves.
- But it was at that very moment when Jesus embraced him, **that this painful, broken life** was changed forever.

You see, Jesus touches the leper and says, "*I do choose. I am willing. Be made clean.*" And... he was!

- So, **Jesus tells the man** to go straight to the priest who could examine him and, according to the law, declare him ceremonially clean.
- In fact, He specifically **asks him not tell anyone** along the way what had happened... but he couldn't help himself!
- We're told in **verse 45** that "*the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened.*"

When Jesus touched that man with leprosy, announcing the Good News of the Kingdom,

- Jesus was demonstrating **not only** that God's **power to heal** was

present, but that God's **love & compassion & mercy** were present as well.

- In everything that Jesus said and did, **He was displaying the mercies & compassion of the Father.**

In fact, Jesus said in **John 14:9** that ***“Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.”***

- And so, through **all the things Jesus did and all He said**, we are able to see right into the heart of the Father.
- Do you want to understand more of the heart of God? Then look at Jesus...
- Do wonder about whether God is loving and gracious and kind? Then look at Jesus...
- because **we're told here in John 14:9 that He is the spitting image** of the Father.

But just as we can know **the Father** more profoundly by seeing what the Son said and did...

- in the same way, the **world can discover Jesus** through the way we love and care for those around us.
- You see, God's mercy and compassion **not only come to us through Christ,**
- **but should also flow out from us** through Christ... to those most desperate for our embrace.

It might be somebody who is suffering... someone who is alone... a single mother...

- a day laborer living half a continent away from the people they love the most.
- It might be a neighbor or maybe somebody that you work with.
- Maybe it's someone you find to be hard to love.

And yet, we won't ever reach people the way Jesus did **until we love the way Jesus loved.**

- We can't **wash the feet of a dirty world** *the way Jesus did*, if we won't touch it...
- If we won't **see their pain & isolation & fears**...
- If we won't demonstrate His love in tangible ways even to those

so different to us.

**So, will you let Jesus' love flow out FROM you TO those around you?**

Will you, for their sake, be approachable?

- Will they have the freedom to bring their struggles and shame before you?
- As we live out our every-day lives, let's allow the **miracle** of His approachability...
- and the **miracle** of His touch to impact, through our lives, the world around us.
- Let's **BE JESUS** to a world hungry for the kind of presence and power that only Jesus can bring.

But remember... He offers His approachability and embrace is not only **for the world around you... but for you as well.**

- He loves you. His Word says that He's loved you with an everlasting love.
- His great passion is that **you abide with Him in His loving presence & power.**

No matter where you may be at this morning... He wants you to know that you can run to Him... just as you are...

- And that **He'll not only welcome you... but embrace you... and pour out His love on you.**
- He wants this reality to **move in you... and through you... to **BE CHANGED** by it...**
- and to **impact the world around you because of it.**