

Mark 1:40-45

At this time of year, most of the people in America are thinking about **love**. And their thoughts are turned to **love** because yesterday was **Valentine's Day**. Yet, such holidays can have a **different** effect on different **individuals**. While some will be **happy** and will feel extremely **loved**, others will be **depressed** and feel extremely **lonely**. Let me illustrate. I'd like you to think back to your earlier days - the days when you were still in grade school exchanging valentines. In those days it paid to be **popular**. I remember how the most **popular** boys and girls would always receive the **most** valentines. And then there were always one or two children who received very **few**. It seemed like if you had **popularity**, you had **everything**. But that's **not** necessarily **true**. Popularity can also have its **drawbacks**. For example, consider the various **movie stars** and **celebrities** who are virtually **mobbed** by the pressing crowds and the paparazzi, who simply want to be near their favorite performer, and maybe get an **autograph** or an exclusive **photograph**. For **them**, popularity can be a real **inconvenience**, or even **worse**.

So how important **is** popularity? Today, let's take **A Popularity Poll** - or more accurately, a poll **concerning** popularity. In our text we find two individuals with two separate opinions on the subject - Jesus and a leper. The **leper** was very **interested** in the **pleasure** of popularity. But **Jesus** was actually **hindered** by the **plague** of popularity.

Let's look at the **leper** first. Being afflicted with leprosy had to be one of the most **difficult** things to deal with in the days when our Savior walked on the earth. The leper not only had to bear the **pain** of open sores and the **anguish** of physical deformity, but also had to bear the **isolation** and **rejection** of society in general. He longed to be **rid** of his horrendous disease, or at least to be accepted by someone as a **friend** - to have someone he could **talk** with, who would not **turn away** from him in disgust. This man would have given **anything** to be popular. Seeking a cure for his leprosy which would allow him to re-enter society, the man even ventured to come into a town (an action which was **forbidden** for him) in order to approach **Jesus**. Humbly falling to his knees the leper prayed, "*If You are willing, You can make me clean.*"

That's quite an **interesting** prayer. This man obviously knew who Jesus **was**, and he also knew the **power** which Jesus possessed. In spite of the fact that his disease was **horrible** to view, he **approached** the Lord. In spite of the fact that

his disease was **incurable**, he sought a **cure** from Jesus. In spite of the fact that he was viewed as a **hopeless** case, he still had **hope**. He came to Jesus with **confidence**, absolutely **certain** that Jesus could help him - that is, if Jesus was **willing**.

Now it just so happens that Jesus **was** willing to help him. He wanted exactly what the leper was **hoping** for. The man wanted to be **cured**, and Jesus **cured** him - **immediately**! He would no longer be an **outcast**, and could return to a **normal** way of life. Jesus knew that the leprosy had served its purpose and was no longer **necessary** in that man's life, so He took it **away** with a miraculous cure. Perhaps we tend to think that this cure was **especially** compassionate because it all happened so **quickly**. Yet, Jesus shows His compassion with **slower** cures too, and sometimes by not even sending a cure at all. He knows all our **troubles**, and He knows **why** we have them too.

We have our **own** ideas about what we would **like** in our lives, and very often we ask the LORD for **help**, but only help to accomplish what **we want**. As Christians, we must remember that **God** always knows what is **best** for us, and we would do well to ask Him to do whatever **He wants**, just as the **leper** did in our text.

This leper had received a new lease on life - a new opportunity to go out and make **friends**, and to live and work in **society** again. He would have the opportunity to become **popular**, if indeed that was what he really wanted. In return for this great miracle, Jesus sought **obscurity** of a sort. He did **not** ask the man to **publicize** this miracle of healing. In fact, He asked just the **opposite**. Jesus said, "*See that you **don't** tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the **priest**, and offer the **sacrifices** that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.*" Jesus did not **need** instant **popularity**, nor did He **want** it. If His miracles were publicized too **soon**, they would be **misunderstood** by too many people. Jesus did not perform miracles for His **own** advancement or for **personal** recognition. He performed them out of loving compassion for **suffering sinners**.

What a **comfort** it is for us to know that His great **tenderness**, this **outpouring** of Christ's love, is both spontaneous and unprejudiced. He treats us **all** as lost sinners, whether we are **lepers**, or have been stricken with some **other** disease, or are **healthy** - whether we are **rich** or **poor** - regardless of our **religious** training, or our **lack** of it. Jesus came to **help**, and to **heal**, and to **save**.

How did the leper in our text **react** to this boundless love of Jesus? Well, he tried to **repay** Jesus by **telling** about his miraculous healing, in spite of Jesus' command that he should **not** tell anyone. Now, I'm sure this man didn't mean any **harm** with his actions. He only wanted to show his **gratitude**. But by **disobeying** Jesus, he had temporarily **hindered** the ministry of Christ. Our text continues, "*Jesus could no longer enter a town **openly**, but stayed **outside** in lonely places.*" Jesus had **told** the leper how he could **show** his thankfulness - by showing himself to the **priest**, and by offering the **sacrifices** which Moses commanded. Showing himself to the **priest** was necessary before the man could re-enter society and resume his former way of life. Offering the required **sacrifices** was an act of **worship**. Jesus was telling the leper that he could show his gratitude **best** by not really doing anything **special** at all. Rather, Jesus wanted the God-pleasing **life** and **worship** of that leper to testify to the miracle which Jesus had performed.

Let that be a lesson for **us** too. At times we may feel that our Christian lives don't have any **meaning** - that the message we convey to others with our words and actions doesn't really make much of an **impact**. We may feel that we ought to be doing something with **monumental** proportions in order to thank the Lord for the salvation which He has given to us. But is that what Jesus has **asked** us to do? Jesus said, "*If you **love** Me you will do what **I** say,*" and in his first letter St. John wrote, "***This is love for God: to obey **His** commands. And His commands are not **burdensome**.***" Strive to follow **Christ's** perfect example - walk in **His** ways - **that's** what He would like us to do. Let your love toward your fellowman be **spontaneous**. If he is **hungry**, **feed** him. If he is **thirsty**, give him a **drink**. If we perform these acts of kindness for our **fellowman**, then we do it for **Jesus** - and, it's not so **difficult** either. All it takes is a kind word **here**, or some loving reassurance **there**.

The leper in our text humbly left the final decision concerning **his** illness in the hands of **God**. What a marvelous example for **us** to follow! Are you **unpopular**? Are you seriously **ill**? Have you recently lost your **job**? Is your **marriage** on the rocks? Do things just seem to be going **downhill** all the time for you? Simply take it to the **LORD** in **prayer** - and ask for **His will** to be done. Then leave it in the hands of the **LORD**, and He will **bless** our humble efforts in His **own** way and in His own **time**. That sounds **easy**, but sometimes it's **not**.

We've drifted rather far away from the subject of **popularity**, but I guess that shouldn't be too surprising. God has shown us that it doesn't **matter** whether

we receive **five** valentines or **fifty**. It doesn't **matter** whether we have **ten** friends or only **one**. Popularity is **not important**. But what **is** important is that Jesus has shown **compassion** toward us, not only by **protecting** us through our earthly life, but especially by **saving** us from the torments of eternal death. **Thank** Him through your **humble** and **willing** service. Amen.