

## STUDY 2. MATERIAL FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

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*The small group leader should be aware of the following:*

- 1. The nature of leprosy and how it was regarded in Biblical times. See the attached article from the Holman Bible Dictionary. It was as much a social illness as a physical illness and as the article correctly says, not all diseases that were labelled leprosy were necessarily true leprosy.*
- 2. The leper infringed the Biblical codes by first running to Jesus and initiating the contact (he was bound to warn people of his presence) and then by kneeling before him. Kneeling was reserved for Royalty. It could be claimed by any cynical observer that he forgot who he was (he was a leper without rights to approach any body) and who Jesus was. (Jesus, without our special insights should have been regarded as an untrained rabbi.)*
- 3. The story of the healing of the leper is not just a healing story or a pointer to the power of Jesus. It is also a challenge to the social and religious customs of the day. As one commentator points out, "The miracle not only challenged the laws of nature but the laws of society." (C. Meyers. "Binding the Strong Man." 2000. p.152).*
- 4. We read that Jesus was overcome with compassion. This powerful word is only used with Jesus as the subject (apart from in some parables). Jesus shows compassion towards the leper, the crowd that was hungry, the crowd that was "lost like sheep without a shepherd" and the widow of Nain. It also used to describe the emotion that the father felt when the prodigal was seen returning. The emotion was so strong that Jesus ignored social convention and Old Testament law and touched the leper.*
- 5. Some of the ancient texts substitute "anger" for compassion. The sermon contains some suggestions as to why this verb may have been used.*
- 6. The suggested reasons as to why Jesus commanded the leper (and the Disciples' demons etc) to keep quiet are numerous and have generated some controversy. See the attached article on the Messianic Secret. The Messianic secret is mentioned in Matthew and Luke but is more strongly featured in Mark's Gospel. Not included in this article is the suggestion that Mark used this concept to explain why people could not recognize Jesus for who he really was until after the resurrection. Some suggest, in this particular instance, that Jesus was seen as contaminated in the eyes of the Old Testament because he touched the leper and he wanted that kept quiet. This overall emphasis on secrecy in Mark is a contrast to the emphasis that is found in John's Gospel. Miracles in John highlighted the Divinity of Christ.*

**LEPROSY** A generic term applied to a variety of skin disorders from psoriasis to true leprosy. Its symptoms ranged from white patches on the skin to running sores to the loss of digits on the fingers and toes.

For the Hebrews it was a dreaded malady which rendered its victims ceremonially unclean--that is, unfit to worship God (Lev. 13:3). Anyone who came in contact with a leper was also considered unclean. Therefore, lepers were isolated from the rest of the community so that the members of the community could maintain their status as worshipers. Other physical disorders or the flow of certain bodily fluids also rendered one unclean (see Lev. 12:1-14:32; 15:1-33). Even houses and garments could have "leprosy" and, thus, be unclean (Lev. 14:33-57).

Jesus did not consider this distinction between clean and unclean valid. A person's outward condition did not make one unclean; rather that which proceeds from the heart determines one's standing before God (Mark 7:1-23; compare Acts 10:9-16). Therefore, Jesus did not hesitate about touching lepers (Mark 1:40-45) and even commanded His disciples to cleanse lepers (Matt. 10:8). Jesus even made a leper the hero of one of His parables (Luke 16:19-31). **Holman Bible Dictionary**

### **Leprosy**

also called *Hansen's Disease*, a chronic disease of man caused by the *Mycobacterium leprae* bacillus, characterized by lesions of the skin and superficial nerves; the disease also may involve the eyes, testes, and mucous membranes of the nose and pharynx. Destruction of the peripheral nerves by the bacillus leads to a loss of sensation, which, together with progressive tissue degeneration, may result in the extremities becoming deformed and eroded. There are two principal types of leprosy. The lepromatous, or cutaneous type is marked by widespread infiltration by grainy masses of chronically inflamed tissue under the skin, the mucosal membranes of the upper respiratory tract, the face, and the testes; untreated, its prognosis is poor. The tuberculoid type is marked by initial macular (stainlike) lesions with raised, reddish borders and by patches that become insensitive to physical stimulus as they spread. This type may remain quiescent or may improve, with spontaneous disappearance of the lesions and complete recovery. Modern therapy of both types involves the long-range use of sulfone drugs, which brings about immediate arrest of the infection and improvement in most cases, but the drugs may produce undesirable side effects or even exacerbations of the symptoms. Occasionally the infection persists despite continued chemotherapy. In the early 1980s health officials observed a worldwide increase in resistance to *dapsone*, the drug most commonly used in the treatment of leprosy, and predicted an increase in the incidence of the disease. Leprosy seems to date to antiquity. It is most prevalent in low, humid, tropical or subtropical areas of the world, most cases being found in Asia, Africa, South America, and the Pacific Islands. Reported cases of leprosy throughout the world number at least 2,000,000, and the actual number of infected persons may be as high as 11,000,000. The mode of transmission of leprosy is still unclear. It seems that prolonged, close physical contact with an infected person usually (but not invariably) precedes active infection in those who are susceptible. Congenital leprosy is unknown; infants born of infected parents do not develop the disorder if separated from them at birth. Accidental transmission has been known to occur by improperly sterilized hypodermic and tattoo needles. The prevention of leprosy rests upon the recognition of bacteriologically positive cases so that they may be isolated and treated. Physiotherapy, reconstructive surgery, and vocational training have assumed great importance in the rehabilitation of persons with arrested leprosy. **Copyright © 1994-2002 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.**

## **MESSIANIC SECRET**

A Title that Bible students use to explain Jesus' commands to His audience and His disciples not to reveal who He was after His performance of messianic wonders. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus made every attempt to conceal His true identity as the Christ. Although the messianic secret can be found in the Gospels of Matthew (8:3-4; 9:29-31; 12:15-16; 17:9) and Luke (4:41; 8:56; 9:21), Mark used the mysterious unveiling of the messiahship of Jesus as the unifying theme of his Gospel. Typically, Matthew understood the messianic secret as the fulfillment of prophecy (Matt. 12:17-21); Luke provided no explanation. Mark, however, used the messianic secret to organize his story around the progressive revelation of the person of Christ and the messianic consciousness of the disciples. Demons demonstrated that they recognized Jesus immediately: "I know who You are--the Holy One of God!" (1:24-25,34; 3:11-12; 5:6-8; 9:20 NIV); nevertheless, Jesus suppressed their confession. Jesus prohibited public profession by those who experienced miraculous healing (1:43; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). The parables of Jesus were offered in order to keep "outsiders" from learning the secret (4:11-12). Even the disciples, once they related that they understood the "mystery of the kingdom of God" (4:11), were sworn to silence (8:30; 9:9). Why did Jesus want to keep His messiahship a secret?

Perhaps Jesus avoided the title due to the popular messianic expectations of the people--they were looking for a political deliverer. Some believe that Jesus prohibited messianic proclamation so that He could continue to move about freely in public. The only parable of Jesus which Mark recorded exclusively may provide a clue to the purpose of the messianic secret. Jesus introduced the parable of the secret growing seed (4:26-29) with the proverb: "For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it should come to light" (4:22 NASB). Jesus intended for people of faith to learn the secret of His messiahship (4:11,34). He compared the mystery of the kingdom of God to a man who sows seed and discovers, to his amazement, that seeded ground produces plants which secretly grow at night--"he knoweth not how" (4:27). Like the seed which is covered by ground, the secret of Jesus' identity would be concealed for a season: discovering the messianic secret would take time. Jesus did not force people to accept Him as Messiah; "those who had ears to hear" must learn the secret on their own. The disciples not only needed time to recognize Jesus as Messiah (4:41; 6:52; 8:17-21), they also needed time to come to terms with His messianic agenda: messianic suffering precedes messianic glory (9:31-32). Complete human understanding of the messianic secret would only be possible after the resurrection (9:9-10). Therefore, no immediate messianic profession would possess any depth of understanding (especially demonic confession!). Jesus forced the disciples to think about the secret until they could articulate the secret.

Rodney Reeves, Holman Bible Dictionary

## STUDY 2. QUESTIONS

1. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt really lonely? What was it like?
2. a. What do you know about leprosy? (Your group leader is an expert.)  
b. What was the Old Testament teaching regarding leprosy?  
(See Leviticus 12:1-14, 13:3 14:33-57, 15:1-33.)

*It would be a long and tedious process to get the group to read all of the verses. If your group is big enough give sub groups a passage each to research this question.*

### 3. See Mark 1:40-45.

What hints are there in the passage that leprosy was seen as “dirty” rather than being an illness?

*Note the number of times “cleansing” is used rather than “healing.”*

4. a. What is your attitude to the following illnesses?
  - i. Monkey Pox?
  - ii. AIDS
  - iii. Alcoholism.
  - iv. Schizophrenia
  - v. Sexual perversion.
  - vi. Pornographic addiction
  - vii. Other Sexually Transmitted Diseases.
- b. Do you agree that all of the above are illnesses?
- c. In the light of the story we have just read, how would Jesus treat victims of the above illnesses?

*This question, no doubt will stir up some discussion. Let the opinions be aired, and then at the appropriate time, point out that the attitudes that are being aired are exactly the same as the attitudes that society would have had towards lepers in the times of Jesus. There would have been fear, blame and social isolation.*

5. What do you think were the beliefs and opinions that the leper had towards Jesus?

*Note that he treated Jesus as a royal person with cleansing and healing powers.*

6. a. What does Mark tell us about the attitude of Jesus towards the leper?  
b. What is so remarkable about this attitude?  
c. What other times is this emotion stirred up in Jesus?  
(See Mark 6:30-36, 8:1-3, Luke 7:11-15.)

*Refer to the sermon for background.*

7. a. Some ancient texts tell us that Jesus was filled with ‘anger’ when the leper made his request. How could this be possible? What would have made Jesus angry?  
b. Are there forms of illness that make you angry? What are they? Why?

8. Jesus tells the man to keep his cleansing and healing quiet? Why did he do that?

*Refer to the article from Holman on the ‘Messianic Secret’.*

9. **See Mark 1:32-34, 3:11-12, 5:41-43, 8:27-30, 9:8-9**  
a. What do all these passages in Mark's Gospel have in common?  
b. Can you explain why this is a feature of Mark's Gospel?

*These are all passages related to the Messianic Secret concept.*

10. Compare the religious, physical, emotional and social state of the man before and after he met Jesus?

*Once the man was pronounced "clean" by the priest (the text does not tell us that he went to the priest) he would have been restored to the synagogue, would not have been regarded as an outcast or a sinner, and would have been restored to his family and community.*

11. a. Is there any way that you can identify with the leper?  
b. Are there people in our church who really need to understand this story?

*Ask this question from two perspectives:*

- i. Those who feel too superior to touch the metaphorical leper.  
ii. Those who feel unworthy to be in God's presence.*

12. a. What is inspiring about Jesus in this story?  
b. What is inspiring about the leper?  
c. How could this story affect our lives?