



Witnessing After COVID-19: Ending the Isolation

REV. DR. MARK WOOD

PART 1: SEPARATION AND THE FALL

In our recent experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of our nation was closed down and we were introduced to the concept of “social distancing.” At first, many people resigned themselves to being separated from other people. Some people even responded with humor, such as introverted people saying that they’ve been training for this moment their entire lives. But as the pandemic continued, isolation began to wear on people. The jokes subsided and people became anxious to be with other people again.

What was behind the shift? In part, people’s tolerance for having their normal lives disrupted ran out. But the deeper cause is that human beings were created to be in each other’s company, not isolated from one another. The account of Creation captures this well:

Genesis 2:18–25

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’ Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

God created us to be in community with other people. He also created us to be in fellowship with Him. In His perfect creation, Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect community with one another and perfect fellowship with the Lord. But sin destroyed both. One of the results of the Fall is separation in place of community. The close fellowship that Adam and Eve had with God was replaced with banishment.

Genesis 3:22–24

“Then the Lord God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—’ therefore

the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.”

Sin infects every aspect of our lives outside of the Garden. The Lord told Eve that as a consequence of sin she would experience great pain in childbirth (Gen. 3:16). Adam would struggle to grow food in the fallen world. That fallen world — our world — is filled with hardships, suffering, violence, disease and death. Separation from God and from other people is part of our world.

In Leviticus, we hear about the relationship between our fallen world and separation, through the story of those who contracted the skin disease known as leprosy. Seen as an outward manifestation of a sinful condition, leprosy was greatly feared among God’s people. When a priest determined that someone had leprosy, that person was forced to live outside of the camp and away from other people.

Leviticus 13:45–46

“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.’ 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.”

Leprosy wasn’t the only condition that led to forced separation. Leviticus lists a number of sins that called for severe punishment, from unlawful sexual relations to sacrificing children. While someone may argue that leprosy was not a result of sin, there is no mistaking the guilt of someone engaged in these prohibited acts. Leviticus 18:29 sums them up as “abominations” and sets the severe penalty for those guilty of them:

Leviticus 18:29

“For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people.”

We could say that the people who practiced the “abominations” were spiritual lepers who were to be cut off from God’s people to keep them from infecting others with their sinful actions.

Discussion Questions:

- › What does God’s statement “It is not good that the man should be alone” tell us about God’s design for us as human beings?
- › Why does sin separate us from God?
- › In what ways does sin separate us from one another?
- › What are some of the ways that we suffer from “spiritual leprosy?”

PART 2: THE SEPARATION OF PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL LEPERS

Leviticus 13 required people with physical leprosy to live alone outside of the camp and to warn others away by calling out “Unclean, unclean.” Like many other restrictions found in the Old Testament, the teachings of the rabbis collected in the Talmud added specific requirements to the restrictions. During Jesus’ earthly ministry people were required to stay at least four cubits away from lepers — an interesting distance since a cubit is about 18 inches, making the mandated separation the same six feet required by COVID-19 social distancing measures.

One of the most familiar encounters between Jesus and lepers is found in Luke 17:11–19, the reading that is widely used for the U.S. National Day of Thanksgiving. The account highlights that lepers were isolated from the rest of society and often found comfort in forming their own communities, even bringing together Jews and Samaritans.

Luke 17:11–19

“On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’ When he saw them he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, ‘Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ And he said to him, ‘Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.’”

While Jesus apparently maintained physical separation during His encounter with the ten lepers, He did not follow the rabbinic teachings when He encountered a leper immediately after the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 8:1–4

“When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.’ And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.’”

In touching the leper Jesus was doing the unthinkable. But He was also demonstrating His purpose for coming into the world. While most people never experience physical leprosy, all people suffer from the spiritual leprosy of sin. Sin makes us “unclean” and separates us from God. Sin destroys community and creates isolation. Jesus entered into our sinful and unclean world to remove our sins and uncleanness. He did this by taking them on Himself. Jesus fulfilled what the prophet Isaiah declared and the people of Israel longed for when He came to us in our uncleanness and exchanged it for His righteousness.

Isaiah 64:1–7

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.”

Discussion Questions:

- › Why did Jesus tell the ten lepers who asked for His mercy to show themselves to the priests?
- › How is it that Jesus touched the leper who asked Him to make him clean even though He wasn’t allowed to do so?
- › Does Jesus’ action in touching a leper mean that we can ignore social distancing rules and other mandated restrictions? Why or why not?

PART 3: ENDING ISOLATION AFTER SOCIAL DISTANCING IS OVER

Isolation existed before the COVID-19 pandemic and it will continue long after the restrictions of the pandemic have ended. We engaged in social distancing in order to slow the spread of a disease, but there is another practice of social distancing that isn't health related. We tend to separate ourselves from other people because they are offensive to us. We may separate ourselves from others because of our sinful actions and attitudes regarding race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or social standing. Or we may separate ourselves because of their sins, like the people of Israel who wouldn't have anything to do with "tax collectors and sinners."

Luke 5:27-32

"After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, 'Follow me.' And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' And Jesus answered them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.'"

Jesus didn't separate Himself from the undesirable people of His day, including the reviled tax collectors. Instead, like He did with Levi, He sought them out and called them to follow Him. He ended their isolation and restored them to community. Jesus even engaged in table fellowship with them to show His full acceptance of them. "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2) was made as an accusation against Jesus, but it is actually a wonderful and inspiring description of His love, mercy and grace.

In another account of Jesus enjoying table fellowship with people, we find Him as a guest at the home of Simon the leper. The fact that Simon was hosting a dinner in his home indicates that he must have been cured of his leprosy. We can only speculate how long and how much Simon had suffered with that dreaded disease, but the fact that he is called "Simon the leper" shows that leprosy had a significant role in his life. We don't know how he was cured of leprosy. Having Jesus as his guest might be an indication that Jesus had a role in it.

Mark 14:3-9

"And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, 'Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.'"

While the forced separation of leprosy had ended for Simon, there was someone at this dinner party who was isolated from the community. Her name is not given. She was not an invited guest. Her actions were criticized and the dinner guests scolded her for what she had done. But Jesus accepted her and her actions. In the parallel account in Luke 7, Jesus tells this woman "Your sins are forgiven" and "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:48, 50). He restores her to fellowship and to community.

In describing the actions of this woman as "a beautiful thing," Jesus also explains that what she had done was in preparation for His work to reconcile the whole world to God and end the separation caused by sin. "She has anointed my body beforehand for burial" is His acknowledgement that He was getting ready to go to the cross and give His life for our redemption. He knew that the message of the cross would be

“proclaimed in the whole world” so that people would no longer be separated and isolated in their sins. And those who hear this good news would also hear about the loving action of this woman who, though once separated from her Lord by her sins, in faith could come into His presence and touch Him.

The Gospel that Jesus anticipated being “proclaimed in the whole world” is the Gospel that has brought us into fellowship with God and into community with one another. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the mandated isolation that we experienced, we have a new appreciation for the hardships of those who live in isolation apart from the pandemic. We have good news to share with them. It is the good news that Jesus has paid for their sins, removed their uncleanness, and reconciled them to the Father. He desires that all people would take a place in the community of His church. Jesus still receives sinners and eats with them.

As His witnesses, we share in His desire to gather isolated and separated people into the family of Christ. Reminded by our recent experience with isolation, we take the words of Ephesians 2:12–13 to heart, to “remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Discussion Questions:

- › Why did the Pharisees separate themselves from “sinners and tax collectors”?
- › What are some of the ways that we separate ourselves from other people like the Pharisees did?
- › Who do you relate to more: Simon the leper or the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus?
- › Who are the people in our lives and in our neighborhoods who are “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of [the church] and strangers to the covenants of promise”?
- › What can we do to bring the Gospel to people who are separated and isolated?