

Cultural revelations...limitations of the Law...

When studying the Bible, we often observe with a cultural bias that we are familiar and accustomed with. To understand the writer and his perspective, we are required to learn about his culture set within the period of writing. Only then can we really glimpse the essence of the lesson. Observation is a matter of perspective. Examine the following example.

1. Study Mark 1:40-45. What is leprosy?

Leprosy is a bacterial mediated disease affecting both nerves and skin and leaving the person permanently disfigured.

2. What does the Mosaic Law say about the process of diagnosing leprosy (Lev 13:1-46)? What does this reveal about the leper in Mark 1:40-45?

The Mosaic Law pertaining to skin diseases designated the priests as a sort of public health official who would submit the person up to three examinations with one week quarantines between each. The purpose was to determine if the person has a contagious skin disease. If so, they were designated unclean and they had to warn other healthy citizens by shouting "unclean!" People therefore had time to scurry from their presence. During this time, afflicted people were usually isolated from society into leper colonies symbolic of the person's separation from Israel. Thus the leper suffered physically, mentally, socially, and religiously; the epitome of sin. Despite the likely prospect of public disdain and rejection, the leper's approach to Christ was bold and with the conviction that Jesus had the power to clean and restore his citizenship within Jewish society. The leper did not ask to be healed, he begged on his knees to be cleaned.

3. What does the Law say about cleansing a leper (Lev 14:1-32)? What can you conclude about the purpose of the Mosaic Law? Why does Jesus send the Leper to the priest in Mark 1:44?

To be pronounced clean and thus restored within the community of Israel, the person had to be healed from the skin disease and be certified by the priests. The certification involved a cleansing ritual, which required ceremonies with two birds, a bathing, and another sacrificial ceremony one week later. The Mosaic Law is a specific set of procedures in response to certain circumstances. But observe closely what the Law does; it could declare a leper cleansed but it cannot on its own clean regardless of how closely one follows the Law. What then is the purpose of the Law? The Law's intent is to bring sinners to Christ. By sending the healed leper back to the Rabbis, the Rabbis would have had to certify that the leper had become clean and the priests knew that only God could cure one of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14). The Rabbis would have had to face the contradiction of pronouncing the healed leper as clean, but deny the One who healed him.

Leviticus is identified as an example of a legal literary genre. Other biblical examples of legal literary genre are found Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and this largely makes up the Old Testament (also known as Mosaic) law (Ex 20-Deut). The Old Testament laws can be viewed as falling into three categories: 1) ceremonial, 2) civil, and 3) moral. Leviticus and Numbers have mostly ceremonial laws as they regulate the Old Testament priests in their conduct of sacrifices, issues of cleanliness and food for religious purity, and the priesthood. In this example with Leviticus, by understanding an aspect of the Old Testament Law, one can better understand the behavior of the Leper and the significance of Jesus' actions. When reading a New Testament incident involving any laws, take a moment and cruise through the Old Testament Law!

"The grammatical and historical approach is not an end in itself; it is to lead us to Christ." Martin Luther (1483-1546)

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