

## **Touched by Jesus**

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**Rich Nathan**

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**Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series**

**Mark 1:40-45**

I want to begin by telling you a story about a man that I'm going to call Doug. Doug was raised in a large Roman Catholic family. He's the oldest of nine children. Doug's dad was absent a lot during his early childhood. He was a good dad and spent a lot of time assisting the church and participating in various community events, but he was distant.

When Doug was 14 years old, he went away to a Roman Catholic Seminary. And while he was there, he was sexually abused by other students and faculty members. Here is a 14-year old boy that you send off to a religious school. You think, "This is going to be the safest possible environment for my son," and he ends up being abused.

Well, Doug sought counseling from the seminary rector, the head of the seminary. What he didn't realize was that the rector was also involved in the abuse of children. In fact, the rector, a number of years later, was convicted of child abuse in a very public trial. The rector decided to cut Doug off at the pass, because he knew that Doug would talk with his parents. So the rector ahead of time called his parents and suggested to them that Doug was having mental problems. That he was delusional and that the supposed abuse that he was talking to lots of people about had been investigated and had never happened.

What was most hurtful to Doug was that his parents believed his teachers and for many years they thought that Doug was crazy.

During college Doug tried to repress what had happened to him. But the abuse left an enormous wound in his soul. Sexual abuse wounds people. And unless it is healed, it almost always will manifest itself in some kind of broken behavior.

Doug moved to Columbus and decided to plunge headlong into the gay lifestyle. He used to meet men at bars and cruise the parks. In his late 20's, he got involved in a 4-year relationship with another man. What he didn't know was that from the outset, the man was cheating on him. He came home one day and found his so-called lover with another man.

So Doug decided to give church another chance and he sought help for his on-going struggle with homosexuality. And also, he sought healing for the sexual abuse that he suffered in seminary. Unfortunately, the pastor of Doug's church didn't offer healing. He didn't offer help. He didn't even offer a counseling referral to someone else who might be more prepared to deal with the issues that Doug was struggling with. The pastor of Doug's church simply said to Doug, "I want you to leave this church and never show your face here again."

When I talked to Doug, I asked him, "Were you creating a disturbance in your church?"

He said, "Rich, I swear to you I was the model church member. I even sang in the choir. I tried to explain the pastor that I wasn't expecting him to do anything for me, since I thought

that my problem was probably beyond his resources, I just begged him to refer me to someone who could help me.”

Well, it is against this backdrop of abuse by church leaders and rejection by church leaders, people that are supposed to represent the kindness and compassion of Jesus, that Doug’s life changed. I want you to hear this. This is in Doug’s own words. He said:

It was early in the summer of 1995 and my life seemed to be going pretty well. I had a good job, a nice apartment and was generally in good health. I was feeling a bit edgy about my upcoming trip home to attend my brother’s wedding in Michigan. I knew that it would be the usual barrage of questions: ‘Are you seeing anyone?’ ‘When are you getting married?’...I was ready to go and be the big brother at this wedding and would return to my wonderful life and my search for ‘Mr. Right.’

Within a week of my return from my brother’s wedding, I was faced with the only thing that could bring my plans for my life to an end. It was the one thing that I would not let myself believe could ever happen to me. I was diagnosed with HIV. I lost all perspective and hope and was certain of only one thing – my imminent death.

It was against this backdrop that a former college roommate and his wife asked me to be part of their search for a church here in Columbus. They proceeded to describe some of what they did and did not want in a church. I was only able to think of one place that even remotely sounded like the kind of church they were seeking. I remembered that back in 1992 a friend had invited me to attend church with him at Vineyard for the last three weeks

before he left for California. That church had stuck in my mind as ‘the warehouse with purple awnings.’ My friends insisted that I go with them to show them where this place was. I eventually agreed so that they would stop bugging me about it.

We went to one of the Sunday morning services and in the announcements there was a ministry mentioned that helped people who had AIDS and who were HIV positive. Although I didn’t show it at the time, I was shocked that a church would have a ministry like this, but even more that they weren’t afraid to announce it publicly. My previous experience of church was not only of blatant rejection of me for my gay life, but also for the fact that I would think of accusing church leaders of such horrible acts as sexual abuse. I was so blown away with the idea that a church was willing to look at the truth regardless of its implications on their reputation that I went home and cried uncontrollably for hours. At the Vineyard that day I recognized the loving heart of God that I had known as a child.

My friends and I returned the next week. We liked what we were seeing and decided to give this church an honest try. It was only a few weeks before I gave Christ control of my life and my former college roommate accepted Jesus too. I began to understand God’s gift to me. For the first time since the sexual abuse occurred, I began to see hope restored to my life. I had abandoned God because of abuse from leaders in other churches. I discovered in a men’s group four other guys who were willing to face their issues along with me. None of them were struggling with homosexuality. But I realized that every single man has issues that keep him from intimacy with God. I discovered healthy, normal relationships with other men. We were all going after God and there was a safe place where we could go after him together.

Because of what God has done in my life through the church, I have entirely left the homosexual lifestyle. I still experience occasional temptation, but it is totally in check and I don't any longer experience the consuming desire that I used to. God has provided me with the complete suppression of HIV in my body through the use of new anti-retroviral drugs.

I now help to co-lead Gideon's Call, a ministry at our church that assists men and women to leave the homosexual lifestyle. Because of what several of my friends have seen God do in my life over the past few years, three of my closest friends have come out of the gay lifestyle and have accepted Jesus."

You know, there are lots of people who believe that Jesus and his church probably have no room for someone like them.

I think of a man who came to our church several years ago after he was diagnosed with the AIDS virus. He had been told by his former pastor to leave the church and never come back. When he came to Vineyard with some friends he expected the same treatment. The first weekend he was here, he heard an announcement for Project Compassion – our ministry to people infected with the AIDS virus. He was so blown away that he said he went home and cried for hours.

I think of the list of people that Jerry Falwell mentioned in his rather ill-advised remarks following the World Trade Center attacks. But really, every group that Falwell mentioned – the ACLU, the feminists, liberals, gays, lesbians – all of these folks are probably convinced that there is probably nothing for them in Jesus or in his church. I would add to the list

people who are scientifically trained, folks with advanced degrees – the sciences: doctors, biologists, physicists, engineers – people who have law degrees or advanced degrees in the social sciences – in psychology, anthropology, or in the liberal arts, philosophy and English. Many people with advanced degrees or scientific training believe that there is no way that someone like them could ever find a meaningful place in a church or in a relationship with Jesus.

I just want to say this morning that I know how you feel, if you think that the church probably doesn't offer someone like you a place, and someone like you probably can't have a rich meaningful relationship with God. Before Jesus touched me, I absolutely believed that I was the sort of person who did not fit into Christianity because of my own wiring. I was a rationalist, a thorough-going, secular rationalist. I was not the type of person who was likely to travel to the Andes Mountains and sit on a mountain looking for spiritual answers. I wasn't an artist or a musician, or a poet – you know, the kind of person who is sensitively exploring the true meaning of the universe. I thought I was too logical, too rational. I did not find it easy to believe in Christ or in the Bible. I hate to admit it, but I remember thinking that I was too smart to become a Christian.

I know that there are some of you today who believe in your most honest moments that there is something about you – your wiring, your intelligence, your reasoning ability, your politics – there is something about you which renders you the least likely candidate to sign up for church or for Jesus.

And, of course, if you are coming from some other religious background, if you are a Muslim, a Buddhist, you have no religious background, people from other religious backgrounds or no religious backgrounds especially feel that there is absolutely no way that there is anything for me to be found in Jesus or the church.

I have found two strikes against me in coming to Jesus and joining his church. I was a thorough-going secular rationalist, and I was raised in a Jewish family where I never heard the name “Jesus” except as a swear word. I am a living miracle standing up here talking to you about Jesus from the place that I started.

I know some of you have had terrible experiences with church. Maybe every day of elementary school you had your knuckles rapped by Sister Mary Margaret Therese. My father-in-law told me of the torture that the nuns at his parochial school used to put the children through. He has frequently said to me, “Rich, I know about church and I am not interested.”

Maybe you are like my father-in-law. Maybe the church you went to was just one big continual fund-raising machine and the real message underlying every other message was give more money to the pastor or the church. Lots of people, for one reason or another, past hurt and rejection, self-image, politics, your personality, your education – lots of people sincerely believe that they are not suitable candidates for Jesus or the church.

And this evening [morning], what we are going to be looking at is the story of a man who represents, perhaps in the starkest possible way, a person who was repeatedly told by life

experiences, “There is nothing for you to be found in God and nothing to be found for you in God’s people. You had better look elsewhere for answers, for meaning.” But miracles of miracles, we are going to discover that Jesus totally contradicted this man’s prior life experience. Jesus changed this man. I’ve called today’s talk, “Touched by Jesus.” Let’s pray.

Mark 1:40-45 – *A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: “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.” Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. yet the people still came to him from everywhere.*

We read in v. 40 that a man with leprosy came to him, came to Jesus, and begged him his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Now, leprosy is a horrible disease. It begins with little specks on your eyelids, or the palms of your hands, or your feet. And then it spreads over the body. It bleaches your hair so that your hair becomes white. Your skin loses all of its color. There is this almost death-like pallor that covers the skin. Your skin becomes crusted with scales and it erupts with oozing sores.

But something more terrible happens below the skin. Below the skin the network of nerves that connect your hands, your limbs to your brain and spine gradually get eaten away so that



the real problem with leprosy is not what's happening on the surface with the skin. The real problem with leprosy is that it acts like an anesthetic to deaden a person's feeling of pain.

There is a Christian physician named Dr. Paul Brand. I don't know if he is still alive. If he is, he would be a very old man. But along with several other researchers, he discovered that the reason for the awful disfigurement of lepers, the loss of their fingers, so that they have just little nubs, or the loss of their feet or limbs, or the eating away of the flesh – the reason for the awful disfigurement of lepers is not as had been thought for centuries, that leprosy was a rotting infection that eats away at your flesh. Dr. Paul Brand, and several other researchers, proved that the disfigurement to lepers was caused by the destruction of the body's pain warning system. That what happens in leprosy is that the disease acts like an anesthetic. It brings numbness to your fingers and feet, to your limbs, to your ears, eyes and nose.

For example, Dr. Brand, in his book titled Pain: The Gift Nobody Wants, tells a story about a girl named Tanya. Her mother told Dr. Brand that when Tanya was 17-18 months old she left her in a playpen. And when she came back, she saw Tanya finger painting red swirls on the white plastic sheet in the playpen. Her mom said, "I didn't grasp the situation at first. But when I got closer, I screamed. The tip of Tanya's finger was bleeding and she was using her own blood to make the designs on the sheet."

Her mother screamed at her and said, "Tanya, what happened?"

Tanya just smiled. And that's when she saw streaks of blood on her teeth. She had bitten off the tips of her fingers. Over the next year, Tanya's mother and father tried to convince her

that it was bad to bite the tips of her fingers off, but she would just laugh. And she would begin to manipulate her parents. Every time her parents tried to discipline her, Tanya would put her finger in her mouth and threaten to bite off another finger tip.

When Dr. Brand saw her, at age 4, her fingers had been chewed down to the nubs. She had numerous foot injuries. Her mom said that she would step on tacks or glass, or twist her ankles and never respond. She would just walk around for days with a tack in her foot.

See, the awful thing about leprosy is that it deadens a person's pain sensors so that a person doesn't respond to scalding water on their skin, or oil splashing up from frying. Dr. Brand told a story of being in India and watching in horror as a man reached the stump of his hand into some burning coals to move a potato. Leprosy doesn't eat away your flesh. It eats away your capacity to feel so that you become impervious to other injuries. You are deadened.

Now, the story of this leper can be read on lots of different levels. It certainly can be read to tell us about the authority of Jesus and his introduction of the kingdom of God into this world. We certainly ought to read the story of Jesus as a story of physical healing. Jesus physically healed people and he continues to physically heal people today. We have numerous people in our church that have been physically healed by Jesus. If you are ever interested in some of their stories, we actually have a booklet of testimonies written by people regarding healings that Jesus did in their lives.

But the story can also be read to speak to us about some very basic spiritual truths regarding who we are as human beings, and who Jesus is. You know, leprosy is mentioned many,

many times in the Bible and not just because it was such a loathsome disease, although it is, or so scary. It is scary. But I think leprosy is mentioned so often because it demonstrates to us in a physical way an extraordinarily accurate picture of what sin does in the life of a person. If you want to gain a really clear picture of the devastating affects of sin, just look at leprosy. Just what happens when sin invades; look at leprosy.

There is this gradual deadening effect either of your nerve endings, or with sin of your conscience. The Bible regularly talks about the effects of regular sin as hardening your heart, or searing, cauterizing your conscience. Like touching a hot iron, it cauterizes your skin. Psychologists have, for a long time, recognized the deadening effects of addictive behaviors. They have a term for this deadening effect – they call it tolerance. Gradually, over time, you need, you want more of an addictive behavior or an addictive substance to feel satisfied. What you've done in the past is not enough to give you a thrill. You've gotten deader. If you are addicted to drugs or alcohol, and some of you have been and some of you are, your body over time forms a new chemical balance so that you need stronger drugs or more alcohol to get the same effects. And then over a period of time, as your tolerance really builds, you need stronger drugs or more alcohol, just to feel OK. You no longer really get high. You just need the drugs or alcohol to cope with life, to survive.

If you are a sexual addict, the type of pornography you use, or the type of sexual encounter that you demand becomes more extreme as your tolerance threshold rises. And some of you have experienced that. If you are a caffeine addict you need coffee just to feel normal and you drink coffee at night and still sleep peacefully. If you are a materialist, you simply adjust the amount of stuff you need to your rising standard of living. If you are a poor college

student, you don't need that much. But as your income rises, you find you need, you want, you crave more and more and more. America is filled with people who have gained a tolerance for more stuff. If we are talking about gambling, the risk needs to be greater, the bets have to be higher, the pots have to be bigger, the odds have to be longer to get the adrenalin rush.

There is this progressive insensitivity in sin, just like in leprosy. And there is this thorough infection in sin, just like in leprosy. When the gospel writer, Luke, records the story of the leper, he uses a technical medical term for the man's condition. Luke was a physician and he said that the man was full of leprosy. He was fully infected. In and out of his body he was thoroughly filled with leprosy.

Now, not only does sin deaden us so that we can move into more and more extreme behaviors, extreme outbursts of anger, or selfishness, not only does sin deaden us, but it also spreads so that we become full of moral leprosy. Fully infected at the level of our souls. If it was really possible to x-ray your motives, your real intentions, what goes on over the course of a day or week what passes through your mind, your judgments of other people, the offense that you take to relational slights, your fantasies and desires for revenge – if it were possible to x-ray your soul or my soul, we would see ourselves as horrible disfigured lepers.

Let me ask you an honest question. Does that thought bother you? Do you resent someone saying to you that inside we are all full of moral leprosy? That inside there is an ugliness, a missing part, a rotting away, a decay, a disfigurement in your soul?

You might say, “Honestly, I resent that. I resent you saying that there is something rotting away inside of me. I may make some mistakes. No one is perfect, but I am not a moral leper.”

If you resent it, and I say this with all affection, it is likely that you do not yet know Jesus as your Savior. And it is likely that you have never cried out to Jesus for salvation.

See, until you get honest with yourself, until you really look inside and get a good x-ray of your soul, you are not going to feel your need for a Savior.

You might say, “Well, I think it would be really nice to be in relationship with Jesus. I think he would be a nice addition to my otherwise crowded life. I am super-busy at work or at school. I have a very full life. I’ve a number of hobbies. I enjoy working out. I enjoy golf. I am an excellent skier. I have a number of relationships and I certainly would like to have all of that and Jesus too, if Jesus can assist me to live a more full life. I would be into that.”

“I think that Jesus might be able to help me with my marriage. My husband and I [my wife and I] have been having some difficulties, or I have had a hard time finding a marriage partner because I struggle with commitment. I certainly would be interested to hear what Jesus would have to say, any advice that he wants to give.”

There was a great English preacher at Westminster Chapel in London for about 40 years. His name was Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. And Lloyd-Jones once said, “Until you awaken to the fact that your very nature is evil, until you realize that your trouble is you, that *you* are

wrong, that you don't just do wrong things, but you yourself are wrong, that your whole nature is completely wrong, until you realize that, you are never going to realize your need for Christ as Savior."

See, the biblical view of what is going on inside of you or inside of me, the biblical view of human sin, is not what most people think. Most people view their sin as being like a little red ink stain that is dotted on their otherwise clean white shirt. You are wearing this really nice new white shirt and, oh no...the marker you are writing with dripped ink and leaked several red spots on your shirt.

You look at yourself and say, "You know, I see that there are these spots. I am not as patient as I should be. Sometimes I can be really impatient. Sometimes I am really short with my temper. I am easily offended. I am very, very sensitive. I am overly sensitive. I walk through life like a person with a bad sunburn. Yes, I see the little red spots. I do drive too fast and I sometimes break the speed limit. And I also sometimes lie, because I always break the speed limit. I do gossip. Yes, I do suppose that you're right, Rich. I am a sinner because I sin."

The truth about you and me, friend, is so much more horrible than the fact that we have a few red spots on an otherwise clean white shirt. Our real condition, according to the Bible, is more akin to putting your white shirt in the washing machine with a leaking red marker and swishing it all around for 45 minutes so that when you take the shirt out it is completely pink. There are not just these little red dots on it. It is completely pink – every fiber, every thread is thoroughly dyed with red ink.

We are thoroughly infected with sin. The famous poet T.S. Elliott once graphically described sin as being like a house with a faulty drain pipe that comes from underneath the toilet. He said when you walk into a house with a faulty drain, the smell permeates the house in every corner – the bedroom, the kitchen, the living room, the study – you can smell the stench everywhere.

This man was full of leprosy and we are thoroughly infected in every part of our being with sin.

Sin renders us insensitive. Sin infects us. But it also isolates us. It alienates us. In Jesus' day lepers were totally ostracized from society because it was thought that leprosy was highly contagious, which it isn't. And he had to actually wear his hair down, totally disheveled. And when he came into a town, the leper would have had to scream, "Unclean. Unclean."

Now to this Old Testament law the rabbis added additional really onerous restrictions. If a leper stuck his head inside of a house, the house was considered unclean. It was against the law for the rabbis to even greet a leper. Lepers had to remain at least 50 yards away from other people if they were upwind and 10 feet away if they were downwind. Lepers according to the historian, Josephus, were treated in effect as dead men.

Think about how isolated this man was. He goes through life with no one ever smiling at him, with everyone turning their heads away when he walked by. It may have been a decade or more since anyone put their arm around his shoulder or touched him. Imagine never being hugged ever; never being kissed; never being invited over to anyone's home; never

eating with another individual; never laughing with a friend; never going to a wedding or a party; or even being allowed to go to the funeral of your mother, father, or sister. Imagine no children, no mate, thoroughly isolated.

Anymore, our culture isolates people beyond the privacy fences and tall hedges, gated communities. There have been lots of studies of the effects of suburban architecture on our relationships and the destruction of community, the absence of front porches, the set back of the house from the street, our private back decks, secluded family rooms. We live in a culture of isolated people and you see the effects of that on people's behaviors. Many children grow up without dads. In some of our communities upwards to 70-80% of children grow up without their fathers, without much family support, or family structure. In this isolated lonely place, they join gangs.

Isolated. It is not hard to come up with a list of completely isolated people in America, is it? People in nursing homes, long haul truck drivers who are just looking for companionship often turn to prostitutes, the hearing impaired, people who live in big cities are often very isolated, the mentally ill, foster children who move from home to home, new immigrants in our communities. Imagine what it would be like to have some status, some real value in a culture, to be respected – you have a business, you are a teacher, you are a physician, you have a wide family network and then as a result of war or natural disasters you are pushed completely – your whole society blows up and you find your self in an entirely alien culture, 7000 miles from your homeland, a culture that doesn't value your skills, doesn't value you, one that puts a high premium on where you got your degree from. They speak another



language and eat different foods. Can you imagine how isolating it would be to be a new immigrant like the 20,000 Somalis that have moved into our city in the last decade?

What about young adults who struggle with homosexuality?

You know, friends? You may not feel isolated now. You may be enjoying a wide network of relationships now. Or not. But I think one day everyone of us, everyone of us, will face the pain of aloneness like this leper. As people age, I've watched the circle of their influence shrink. I've watched men and women who are no longer at the height of their powers. They aren't as articulate as they used to be. They aren't as attractive. Their memories are not as good. They are no longer consulted for opinions or advice in the way they used to be. They become forgetful. They begin more often to have health problems. They are in the doctor's office more regularly. Friends of theirs start dying off. They first lose their parents and then, maybe, a sibling. Then at times they lose their spouses. As they age further, the circle shrinks.

Whenever I walk into a nursing home, this is absolutely true, I don't know if you think this, but whenever I walk into a nursing home, I am gripped with this overwhelming sense of, "Rich, one day you may be in here in one of those beds. And then what are you going to have? When you are no longer preaching, when you are no longer writing and traveling and leading, when some of your friends have passed on and others of them are ill and have moved away and your kids are up to their ears in their own responsibilities?" The line of that song that the choir sang really resonates with me. When I am alone, when I am alone, when I am alone, just give me Jesus.

This utterly isolated man falls at Jesus' feet and he says, "Jesus, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Do you know anyone who is utterly isolated and lonely and who is always standing on the periphery, who is never at the center of any group, never at the center of the action, always kind of off, away, alone, out of it? Have you ever said, not only on your own behalf, but on behalf of someone else, "Lord, if you will, you could make her clean. You could heal her."

The leper falls down, "If you are willing, Jesus." What did he see in Jesus? He saw in Jesus someone who was utterly unique, in a category of one.

See, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, in Jesus' day, Judaism related to leprosy different than every other religion in the world at that time. In all the other religions in the world, people would seek out a priest, a holy man, a doctor, a shaman, who for a fee would do some ritual over you. They would sprinkle you with some holy water. They would wave their hands over you. They would grind up some secret ingredients and blow the smoke in your face. They would give you a secret potion.

Jews were totally different. They believed that only God could heal leprosy. There was no ritual, no magic rite, no formula that would make a person well. The only thing a person could do that had leprosy was to pray to God. Jews believed that apart from God, leprosy was incurable. The only job of the priests was to verify whether God had healed the person.

What did this man see in Jesus? This man dared to believe that Jesus was unique. That he was coming before a person who just wouldn't say a little prayer for him or perform some ritual. This man looked at Jesus and somehow had faith to believe that in Jesus God was coming to visit his people. That all the things that the rabbi said about a future day when God would come, that he would break in and bring his kingdom and that it would involve the opening of the eyes of the blind, the healing of the deaf, the paraplegics getting up from their mats and walking and the cleansing of lepers – that all the promises that the rabbis talked about were all coming true in Jesus.

You know, people ask, “Is Jesus God?” Perhaps the best Jesus scholar in the world right now is a man named N.T. Wright. And I love the way he responds to the question, “Is Jesus God?” N.T. Wright basically says, “Well, it depends on what you mean by God. What comes into your mind when you hear the word God? If you think of somebody who is completely aloof and distant from this planet; if when you think of God you think of someone who is really, really far away and probably lives on Mars or in the next galaxy; who is basically uninterested and uninvolved with the affairs of this world, who could care less what happens to people in the World Trade Center or their families or to people in Afghanistan; if what comes to mind when you think of God is a distant aloof, unfeeling, uncaring being – then no, Jesus is not that God.

But if you think of someone who always moves toward pain and not away from it; who is not revolted and does not cover his eyes no matter how awful the behavior is or how awful the situation; if you think of someone who is infinitely loving, completely kind, perfectly generous, inviting, engaging, involved; if what comes to mind when you think of God is

someone exactly like Jesus, then yes, Jesus is God – the infinite creator; the second person of the Godhead; God the Son.

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

Jesus is the willing God. He is the compassionate Savior. We read in the text in v. 41, *Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.* This word “compassion” comes from a word in Greek that literally means “your intestines or your guts.” When Jesus saw this man’s miserable condition, how thoroughly infected he was with leprosy, how totally isolated he was, when Jesus saw the effects of leprosy in this man’s life – physically, socially, spiritually – Jesus felt something that went so much deeper than pity. A feeling that went deeper than kind thoughts; deeper than heart-felt sympathy. What Jesus felt was a gut-wrenching ache.

I have watched my wife, who is one of the most nurturing people that I know, literally grab her stomach and double over in pain, hysterically crying, when one of our children experienced pain or was hurt or was in a dangerous situation. Pain that goes down to her guts. That’s what God, come in the flesh, feels. And from this gut-wrenching compassion Jesus does what no one else does. He reaches across a decades-long gulf, he reaches across this great chasm of isolation and shame and he puts his hand on the man’s rotting flesh and touches him.

Gary Smalley, in his book called The Blessing, conducts a number of studies regarding the effects of touch on different groups of people. Just by sheer accident some nursing home

directors decided that it might be a nice recreational activity for the residents of the home to be given pets from a local animal shelter. You know, to have something to do, like Bingo. They understood that the nursing home residents were lonely and the pets needed some attention.

What they discovered was that the residents that had a pet to touch and hold lived longer than the residents who did not take a pet. And that they had a more positive attitude about life. Even if it is just a pet, someone to talk to, someone to sing to, someone to touch added a dimension to life.

When Marilyn Monroe was being interviewed many years ago by a New York Times reporter, she talked about the pain of growing up in foster families where she was shuttled from one home to another. She always felt alone. She always felt isolated. The reporter asked, “Did you ever feel loved at any time growing up?”

Marilyn Monroe began to cry and said, “Yes, one time.” In one of the homes she went up to the mom, who at the time was putting on makeup, looking in a mirror. She saw Marilyn, who at the time was named Billy Jean. She saw little Billy Jean walk up and she playfully took the rouge and began to dab her on the face. She touched her.

There is such a hunger in our being for touch. I once read a story about a man who had his haircut every week because it was the only time during the week that anyone ever touched him.

Jesus understands our need for touch. He reaches across the isolation and touches the leper. Jesus continues to touch people who come to him today. The Holy Spirit and the church are the ways Christ touches you and me. When Christ, who is in heaven, was moved by compassion so that he chooses to touch you in your pain, in your loneliness, in your isolation, in your need, when you are worried about one of your children, or you don't like yourself, or you feel like life is always hard for you, or you are out of work, or you can't afford college, or you have a bad back, or you are exhausted because you live with someone who is disabled, or you are empty or dissatisfied even though you have all the things that anyone could possibly have, you still feel empty – and Jesus feels compassion for you and wishes to touch you. He does so today by his Holy Spirit and through the church.

You know, when Jesus touches you, when the real Jesus touches you directly by his Holy Spirit, or through the church, which is his body, his hands – we are his hands in this world, we are his mouth, we are his feet – when the real Jesus touches you, he totally transforms you. He changes you in every way.

This is really important because there are a lot of desperate people like the leper, who cry out to Jesus for help. You know, when you are desperate, you really can think, “Well, why not try Jesus? It can't hurt.” So you pray and often Jesus responds. The crisis passes; life changes. You get a new job. A relationship ends. Jesus is so compassionate, he has such a big heart, that it doesn't seem to bother him that people come to him for less than noble reasons. He doesn't seem to be bothered that he is treated as the place of last resort when you've tried everything else. You've tried counseling. You've tried self-help. You've tried doctors. You've moved cities. You've tried all kinds of coping mechanisms. You've gotten

involved in all kinds of relationships. You've done all kinds of things to meet your own need and someone comes up to you and says, "Well, have you tried Jesus?" You say, "Well, why not? It can't hurt."

Jesus is so compassionate that he will welcome people even when he is someone's last resort. Even when a person comes to Jesus saying, "It can't hurt. I might as well give it a try."

But here's the thing: If you really come to the real Jesus and the real Jesus touches your life, you won't be the same. Friend, Jesus has a purpose for you that is different than your purpose in coming to him. You come to him for relief from your problem. You come to him for help because you figure, why not try it. He comes to you to totally transform you, to radically change you by his touch.

If you don't want to be totally changed, then do not go to the real Jesus. Because when Jesus stretches out his hand, as he did with the leper and touched his rotting flesh, when Jesus stretches out his hand in your life, you are not going to be the same person.

When you think about what Jesus did for the leper, he didn't just restore his rotted flesh. In healing the leper, Jesus also broke the power of the anesthetic affect of leprosy, the nerve-deadening effect of the disease. He restored the leper's ability to feel. And friends, the first thing that you are going to notice, if you come to the real Jesus and the real Jesus touches your life, the first thing you are going to notice is that you are going to feel in places that have been dead for years.

The way that I knew that something had happened in my life, that I was a changed person, that I really met the real Jesus, the way that I knew that my feelings came back. I literally cried for the first month after I met Jesus. I used to go back to my dorm room at college and cry and cry all of the collected hurts of growing up in a home that was marred by divorce, by my parents fighting, by violence – all of the places in my life where I shut the door on my emotions and deadened myself from feeling pain. When Jesus came into my life, he touched me and he made me feel again. For the first time in my life, I felt real grief over my childhood.

For the first time in my life, I felt real joy. I was genuinely happy. And it wasn't just in my emotions. When Jesus touches a person, feelings that have died in marriage get revived. You can feel love again. In my conscience, I had the feeling in my conscience restored. People talk about feeling guilty about a lot of things. The truth is, I didn't. And inside of me and inside of a lot of you, I know that your conscience has gotten calloused. Before Jesus touched me, before I encountered the real Jesus, I could do a lot of things that God disapproved of without feeling bad.

That's why when someone says to me, "I don't understand why sleeping with my boyfriend or girlfriend, or having an affair, or going through this divorce, or partying, or lying, or whatever is wrong – I don't know why it is wrong because I don't feel bad about it."

I think to myself, "Of course, you don't feel bad about it. Your conscience is dead. It is calloused. It is insensitive by being abused over and over by your repeated sin."



But this is absolutely the truth. When I met Jesus, he made my conscience alive. One of the most wonderful things that could ever be done in your life is for you to be able to feel guilt again, when you really do something wrong. Misplaced guilt is bad, but even worse, is not feeling guilt when you are guilty. One of the most wonderful gifts that Jesus leaves in his wake, when he touches you and he heals the spiritual leprosy in you, is that you begin to really feel bad when you offend God.

Have your feelings been restored? Has your conscience come alive?

Jesus not only restores us inwardly, he restores us to other people. That's what all this business is about. Where it says in v. 43, *Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "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 wanted this man fully connected back into the community. When Jesus touches you, he just doesn't want you to walk away saying, "Well, isn't that nice. I've got this wonderful relationship with Jesus now in heaven." Jesus wants you to begin to experience the reality of loving relationships within his church, his people. Total transformation means that you are changed inwardly, but you are also changed in relationship to other people. You become part of the church.

You say, "Well, what does God want me to do with all of this?"

I'd like to answer that by showing you a video.

## **Touched by Jesus**

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**Rich Nathan**

**September 29-30, 2001**

**Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series**

**Mark 1:40-45**

- I. Who Are We?
  - A. Progressively Insensitive
  - B. Thoroughly Infected
  - C. Frequently Isolated
- II. Who Is Jesus?
  - A. The Willing God
  - B. The Compassionate Savior
- III. What Will Jesus Do For You?
  - A. Tenderly Touch You
  - B. Totally Transform You
- IV. What Must You Do?