

21st Century Lepers

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from multiple sources)

Introduction: Illustration - A thinking fisherman: after climbing into his waders and boots and gathering up his gear, he sits on the tailgate of his truck and scans the river for 15 minutes or more, looking for rising fish. "No use fishing where they ain't," he says.

Do we fish for souls where they ain't?

It was said of Jesus that He was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). As Christians, we are to be unlike the world in our behavior, but squarely in it as He was. So we have to ask ourselves: Do I, like Jesus, have friends who are sinners? If I have only Christian friends, I may be fishing for souls "where they ain't."

Being among nonbelievers is the first step in "fishing." Second step is love—a heart-kindness that sees beneath the surface of their remarks and listens for the deeper cry of the soul. It asks, "Can you tell me how to make my life mean something?"; and then it follows with compassion. Such love is not a natural instinct. It comes from imitating God who loved us when we were bound by sin (Rom. 5:8).

We are to be channels of God's love and truth, not reservoirs.

B. Over the years of my work as an evangelist, I have often been criticized for spending time with erring brethren. Recent conversation: "We are afraid you might be becoming an erring brother yourself." Member of a dying congregation with 20 members... In 35 years, giving attention and kindness to erring brethren, I have with the help of God brought 11 families, 8 individuals, and two gospel preachers out of institutionalism. How many have you converted by sitting isolated here in your building talking about erring brethren in your Bible classes as if they were lepers?

C. Do not mistake my message. I have never been an advocate of fellowship with sin and error. I am an advocate of Jesus' command to be fishers of men

I. UNDERSTANDING UNCLEANNESS

A. Under the old law, some people were declared unclean

1. Some people temporarily made unclean by touching a dead animal, etc.
 - a. Lev. 13, 15
2. Some were declared unclean due to an illness like leprosy
 - a. Lev. 13:45-46 - unclean person was cast out; was to cry out, "unclean!" "unclean!" to warn others
 - b. Purpose was not evil or unkind; it was for the health and good of the community
 - c. God is not punishing these people, but protecting the healthy
3. Humiliating and difficult; persons not only have to suffer the illness, but are excluded from society and viewed as outcasts; a miserable existence

B. That was the Law of Moses. Have we learned nothing about the better way in Christ, the way of love and salvation?

II. UNCLEAN PERSONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. What did the Pharisees do they encountered a leper or Gentile?

1. Matt. 9:11-13; Luke 7:36-50

B. What did Jesus do when He encountered lepers and sinners?

1. Matt. 11:4-5; Luke 17:12-19
2. Matt. 9:20-22 - Did Jesus condemn the woman because He could have become ritually unclean by her contact?

III. 21ST CENTURY LEPERS

- A. We are under the new covenant - Eph. 2:11-18; Heb. 7-9
- B. There are still many people who are social and religious outcasts, whom many members of churches of Christ would rather forget than fish
 1. Homeless, people suffering from AIDS or other STDs, drug users, alcoholics, prostitutes, homosexuals, et al
 2. These contemporary Pharisees, screen people for the Lord, selecting prospects based on who they think would make a good member of the congregation with which they worship.
 3. These are the same brethren who forty years ago, started congregations for minorities because they didn't want them as members where they worship
- C. How do we react to them?
 1. It's easier to avoid such persons, right?
 2. But is this what Jesus would have us do?
 3. TR loves sermons about Jesus, right? Are you ready to practice what He did?
- D. Did Jesus imply approval of sin and extortion by eating with sinners and tax collectors (Matt. 9:10-13)?
 1. He taught against sin, but ate with the sinners. Contradiction?
 2. Spending time with the lost does not imply fellowship with the lost, any more than preaching against sin is the same as preaching against spending time with sinners
 3. If one doesn't understand this, he is either ignorant or a religious bigot
 4. Jesus was among them because they were sick & needed a physician
- E. Matt. 25:31-46 - Christ expects us to visit the sick and in prison
 1. That might include sinners, people considered "unclean" by members of the church
 2. Does this mean we approve of their sins? Absolutely not!
 3. How can they learn to avoid sin and to be cleansed unless we take the Gospel to them - Rom. 10:13-17?

Conclusion:

- A. Consider the 21st century lepers; they are in misery, suffering physically, emotionally, mentally, and especially spiritually
 1. They are in need of a Physician
 2. We need to feel compassion for the spiritually ill and minister to them
 3. The ones who know they are spiritually ill are most likely not living in nice houses in pretty neighborhoods. We may have to associate with publicans and sinners
 4. Do you act more like a Pharisee or a Jesus?