

The Day I Touched a Leper

A visit to a leper colony in India brought me face-to-face with my unwillingness to love.

After 10 days in India I was feeling homesick. But my host had arranged for one more important visit before my departure. We drove 45 minutes from Hyderabad to talk with some lepers who live in an abandoned building on the edge of the village of Madhapur. Pastor Paul, who leads a Pentecostal church nearby, invited us to help him give these desperately poor people new blankets to sleep on.

My friends, Raja and Sam, and I sat in plastic chairs in front of the crude concrete building, and the lepers gathered around us—sitting on dirty mats on the porch. I tried to focus my attention on their faces, but I couldn't help but notice their gnarled hands and feet. Some of them were missing fingers and toes, while others had leathery scars on their necks and arms.

Flies were swarming everywhere. Something in the air made me itch.

I tried to hide the sadness I felt by engaging the lepers in conversation. They told me how painful their disease is, and how many years they had suffered with it. They explained why the building was abandoned (a Hindu charity established the home, but then stopped funding it.) Then one infected woman pointed to the man next to her and explained that they met and married while living as lepers—and that their son who was born in the facility does not have the disease.

Then she smiled and told me I was the first American to visit them. I told them a story about how Jesus healed many people with leprosy.

It was the first time I'd been this close to a leper, and I was nervous even though everyone had assured me I couldn't

catch the disease simply by being near infected people. When it came time to present the blankets, Pastor Paul asked me to hand them to each person. I wondered what would happen if my hand brushed one of theirs.

When it came time to leave, I wanted to throw my arms around each man and woman. But fear created a barrier. I kept a healthy distance until one of the older men—a dark-skinned guy with a gray beard—reached for my hand to say goodbye. He had stubs where his fingers had been, and he clutched a filthy rag that he used to cover his hands when his pain grew intense.

I smiled, grabbed one of his hands and shook it. I hope he didn't see the uneasiness on my face. Inside I was petrified. I wanted to find soap and water as quickly as possible.

As we drove away I felt ashamed of myself. Why didn't I shake every leper's hand? Why didn't I just hug all of them? Why did I let fear of contamination block the love of Jesus that I told them about?

In India, millions of people have been told they are too unworthy to be touched. In the Hindu religion, "untouchability" is a fundamental principle. Those at the bottom of the caste system are called Dalits, or "untouchables," and in rural areas they are still denied basic human rights even though caste discrimination is illegal.

In extreme cases, Dalits have been forced to drag brooms behind them because their footsteps are deemed unclean. They are forbidden to enter Hindu temples. They are told they earned this pitiable status at the bottom of society because of sins they committed in past lives.

And among Hindus, lepers are considered the ultimate outcasts.

This is one reason Christianity offers such a contrast to people in India. Unlike the Pharisees of His day, Jesus did not avoid lepers or other untouchables. When a man who was

“covered with leprosy” begged Jesus for healing, the Bible says He “stretched out His hand and touched him” (Luke 5:12-13, NASB).

Jesus was radical about touching. We should be the same way.

Christians can be as cruelly aloof as Hindus when we judge people rather than offer mercy. My experience in Madhapur made me realize that I’ve often blocked Jesus’ love because of ingrained prejudices or stupid fears. Forgive me, Lord.

I don’t want to meagerly sprinkle His love here and there; I want His compassion to flow out of me like a gushing spring. I don’t want to just say the right doctrines; I want to show genuine love with a touch. I don’t want to be like the smug Pharisees who were too spiritual to get on the same level with a leper, a prostitute, a tax collector or a sinner; I want to be like Jesus, who touched the untouchable.

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