

When Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale debated one another on national television (notice I am avoiding more recent elections), it was striking to see and hear how both held back from pressing hard with pet arguments all of us knew they cherished. It was clear both were considering their audiences. What "played well" in Atlanta might not do so well in Minneapolis. What you would say to women you might not say to longshoremen. To the elderly or to the upwardly mobile the messages may not be similar. Except on national television in prime time when you're debating.

Some of us smiled -- smirked, even -- to see how carefully each candidate stepped through the land mines laid by his opponent and the press. But both knew well that there is no point giving undue offense to someone who might become your advocate.

Paul knew the same. Without dishonesty we need to learn that style as well....

Anyone who has ever worked with complex systems is familiar with the law of unintended consequences. You attempt something beneficial but it leads to something else unforeseen that is terrible.

For example, a couple of decades ago, the fashionable mantra among environmentalists was, "Save the trees! Use plastic instead of paper!"

Today New York City alone goes through more than 5 billion plastic bags each year, which pollute the seas and highways, and endanger fish and wildlife. The law of unintended consequences people start out with an idea that sounds quite sensible save the trees but something unexpected and quite undesirable results.

We've seen it happen in the medical field. The advent of antibiotics saved millions of lives, so doctors began freely prescribing antibiotics at the sign of a sniffle. But germs are now building up a resistance to antibiotics, especially in medical facilities, to the point that your local hospital may actually be a very dangerous place to go when you are sick. The law of unintended consequences.

It happens in every field. Farmers watch their crops being devoured by insects, so they reach for a spray gun and blast them with pesticide. And it works for a time. But then the crop damage returns, worse than ever, and the pesticide that was so successful has no more effect. Meanwhile the insect that was eating the crops had also been competing with another insect. While insect no. 1 was out of the way, insect no. 2 began having a field day. And the law of unintended consequences is proved once more. (1)

In 1990, the Australian state of Victoria made safety helmets mandatory for all bicycle riders. Wonderful idea. However, while there was a reduction in the number of head injuries, there was also an unintended reduction in the number of juvenile cyclists youths considered wearing a bicycle helmet unfashionable. A new study suggests that the decrease in exercise caused by reduced cycling as a result of helmet laws results in more health problems than riding without a helmet. (2) [Let me hasten to say, helmets are a good idea.] But the law of unintended consequences will get you sooner or later when you are seeking to do something beneficial. It even got Jesus once upon a time.

This was at the very beginning of his ministry. A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Mark tells us that Jesus was indignant. That's interesting, don't you think? Do you remember any other time when Jesus was indignant?

Was it because the man was breaking the law by coming directly up to him? This was a total violation of the rules and regulations concerning lepers in that society. Because of his medical condition the man with leprosy was supposed to shout, "Unclean!" to keep Jesus away! But instead he runs up to Jesus. I'm sure that the people around were surprised at his actions and similarly surprised that Jesus did not run away when he approached. That's one reason why Jesus may have been indignant.

A more likely explanation is that healing was not Jesus' core mission. His mission was much larger. His mission was to teach and preach about the kingdom of God. His mission was to heal the world. And he knew he did not have much time to accomplish all that he was sent to do. Healing people one at a time would slow him down considerably. He had compassion, but he also had a mission.

Or maybe it was the way the man phrased his request. On his knees the man begged, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Are you willing? Didn't the man know that Jesus was always willing to heal? Jesus always wants the best for people.

Have you ever prayed, "O God, if it be your will, then please do such-and-such . . ."? God's will is always for our best good. There may be circumstances that we are not aware of that keeps God's will being exercised at the moment we ask, but God never wills anything except our best good.

Of course we can't know what was going through Jesus' mind. All Mark says is that Jesus was indignant when the man came up and asked to be healed.

And yet, Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man. "I am willing," he says. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left the man and he was cleansed.

We see something very important about leprosy in the terminology which the man with leprosy and Jesus use. The man with leprosy doesn't ask to be healed. He says, "If you are willing, you can make me CLEAN."

And when Jesus responds to his request, he says, "I am willing, be CLEAN!"

One word that has attached itself to the disease of leprosy even unto modern times in the word "Unclean."

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once told a humorous story about a well-dressed woman with a rather affected accent who called on him one evening. She explained to Bishop Sheen: "I would like to become a Catholic, but I would not want any ordinary priest to instruct me, for I am an intellectual. Knowing your background, would you intellectualize your faith for me?"

"Madam," Bishop Sheen answered, "I am willing to instruct anyone who comes to me. As a matter of fact, a young man with leprosy who just finished instructions sat in that very chair on which you are seated now."

Sheen says that dear woman literally flew out of the house and he never heard from her again. (3)

That's been the reaction to leprosy, or Hansen's Disease as it is more properly known, and lepers since biblical times. Unclean. *According to the Guinness World Records 2004*, leprosy is the oldest recorded disease. Archeologists have found written accounts of leprosy dating back to 1350 B. C. in Egypt. (4) And ever since it was first observed, it has been regarded with dread, and it has been associated with the word "unclean."

Besides causing the body to be covered with unsightly sores, leprosy breaks down the nervous system. According to writer Phillip Yancey the nerve endings cease to send signals of pain, and the body is damaged by actions as simple as wearing cramped shoes or grasping a splintered rake. "Pressure sores form, infection sets in, and no pain signals alert the person to tend the wounded area." They have no feeling in parts of their body. So the affected person is vulnerable to losing fingers or toes or even a nose because they have no way of knowing an infection has set in. Often they go blind, because they do not know to blink when dust gets in their eye.

Before long, the leper hardly looks human. No fingers. No toes. Face disappearing. Isolated from others. No one wants to draw near, no one wants to touch. And in a sense, the person with this terrible disease can't touch, for they no longer can feel the touch of another person. A leper in the Old Testament was considered unfit to be in God's presence worshiping (see Leviticus 11 through 15).

Unclean. There was no cure. And so the only thing to do with such persons was to isolate them so they could not infect others. We saw the same phenomenon when the AIDS epidemic hit a few years ago to a certain extent. Fear. The desire to isolate those affected. Worse than the disease itself was the ostracizing that went with it.

Did you notice in the reading of scripture the remarkable fact that Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man with leprosy as he said, "I am willing. Be clean!"

There were times when Jesus healed people by simply saying a word. And yet he reached out and touched this man with this repulsive disease. Mark tells us that immediately the man was healed. Don't you imagine that the fact that Jesus reached out and touched him was part of the man's healing? It was important that he be healed emotionally as well as physically, and touching can have wonderful healing powers with regard to the heart.

The man with leprosy says to the Master, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man. "I am willing," he says. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left the man and he was cleansed. And then Jesus ran into the law of unintended consequences.

Jesus sent this healed man away with a strong warning. Notice that. He doesn't offer a suggestion. Jesus sent this man away 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."

What was there about this warning, "See that you don't tell this to anyone . . ." that this man did not understand? "Instead," Mark tells us, "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 . . .”

Jesus was already becoming an unintended rock star rabbi. People were flocking to him from near and far. And this man healed from leprosy added fuel to the flames. This may have seriously hampered Jesus’ ministry. Even worse, it probably shortened Christ’s ministry because it could not help but draw the attention of both the religious authorities and the Roman authorities. They could not help but see someone who might cause them trouble if his following kept growing.

Of course, it’s all understandable. Jesus could not help but heal this man, even if it was not part of his core mission. Jesus’ nature was pure, unconditional love. So, of course, he was going to reach out to help someone in need, even if it wasn’t in his own best interest. And, of course, this deliriously happy man who had been healed of this terrible scourge was going to tell his family, friends and everyone in earshot. Wouldn’t you? It was just the law of unintended consequences, even if it did hasten the time when Jesus would hang on a cross.

But there is something we need to remember before we leave this place. According to scripture, there was a time when each of us was unclean. We were isolated from God and we were isolated from one another. But, on the cross, Christ reached out and touched each of us and made us clean. But rather than telling us not to tell anyone about it, he tells us to go tell the world. If you have found healing from Christ in any way, tell your family, tell your friends, tell everyone within earshot.

And if there is anyone within your sphere of influence who is socially isolated for any reason, please reach out to them as Christ has reached out to you.

Mother Teresa, a woman who worked with lepers throughout her career in Calcutta, spoke of this once. She said, “We have drugs for people with diseases like leprosy. But these drugs do not treat the main problem, the disease of being unwanted.” (5)

It is a disease, isn’t it? The disease of being unwanted may be the most deadly disease of all. I wonder if many gang members don’t spread the disease of drugs and violence because they are infected with the disease of being unwanted. I wonder if many people lost in a fog of alcoholism or depression don’t suffer to some extent from this same terrible disease. You can do the work of Jesus by simply reaching out in love especially with the power of touch to those who are alone.

A man with leprosy begs the Master, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man. “I am willing,” he says. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left the man and he was cleansed. We can be a healing force in our community. We can do it through the power of love in Jesus’ name.

1. Edward Russell-Walling, *50 Management Ideas You Really Need to Know* (London: Quercus, 2007), p. 172.

2. Faith Popcorn and Adam Hanft, *Dictionary of the Future* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), p. 340.

3. *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 264.

4. Edited by Claire Folkard, et. al. (Guinness World Records Limited, 2003), p. 14.
5. Phillip Yancey, *Soul Survivor* (New York: Doubleday), p 76

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