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## “Jesus Is Willing”

Sermon Series: *Clean Slate*, No. 1

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### Matthew 8:1-4

*1 When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. 2 A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”*

*3 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. 4 Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”*

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We’re in Matthew chapter 8, if you’d care to turn back there with me...to that passage that was read. The gospel...the story of Jesus according to the disciple Matthew, chapter 8.

You know the expression, “clean slate.”

It’s one of those sayings that much of the English speaking world still uses, but that’s not had any *actual, practical* meaning to people for *decades*.

It comes from the big slate boards that teachers used to use (and the little slate boards that *students* used to use) to write on in schools. When your slate was clean, it meant you were starting over. What you’d done in the past, whether good or bad...right or wrong, was wiped away.

Of course, school classrooms have gone from using slate blackboards to greenboards to dry erase boards...and many, now, to computer-powered smart boards.

But to have a “clean slate” still sounds better than having a “clean smart board.”

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So...a clean slate. A new start. A fresh beginning. We like that sound...the opportunity to start over.

Some “clean slate” moments come naturally in our lives...like when we move to a different town or when we change jobs or life seasons.

Probably the most popular time that people declare a “clean slate moment” is when the calendar year changes. Hanging a new calendar on January first seems like a good time to wipe away the past and make a new start...which is, of course, the whole reason behind new year’s resolutions.

“This year I’m going to exercise, lose weight, read a certain book or two, clean out the attic,” or some other thing. Usually people declare those on January 1.

*But*...the **second** most popular time for people to declare a “clean slate moment”...and it actually might be the number one time in our community here...with the schools in town and all that...is at the start of a new **school** year. “This year, I’m going to do things differently. I’m taking on a new attitude, a new look, new priorities, a new group of friends, I’m going to actually study,” or something else.

I remember very well that it was when I went from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade...from middle school to high school in the fall of 1983...that I decided to change my hairstyle.

Seriously.

That was the moment I went from the basic combed straight down “bowl cut” where my mother stuck tape across my forehead and cut along that so she’d make my bangs straight...to parting my hair in the middle and combing it back on the sides.

All the effort I put into that decision...seems like such a waste of time now.

Just the same, I remember how that was a clean slate moment. Going from middle school to high school, I’d no longer look like a geek with a bowl haircut. I’d look like a geek with my hair combed back.

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We’ve all had clean slate moments; you’re thinking about some of yours even now.

There’s something almost magical to us about them...about clean slate moments...although the fact is, we probably give them more credit than they deserve...and...we likely expect more from them than they can actually deliver.

I mean...just because we move to a new place or town doesn’t make us new people. The same things that haunted us in Missouri will most likely haunt us in Massachusetts. We, ourselves, don’t really change...personalities don’t really change with geography. If you’re a kind person in Oklahoma, you’ll be kind in Ohio. If you annoy people in New York, you’ll be annoying in Nebraska.

You see this a lot with aspiring missionaries. I don’t mean the annoying part...I mean the part that thinks, “I’ll be different if I go there.”

But that doesn’t usually happen.

A person who is shy and reserved and never talks to anyone about Jesus in Kentucky will probably be shy and reserved and will never talk to anyone about Jesus in Kenya.

A change in geography does not typically a clean slate make...and the same is true with other changes.

Just because we start a new job doesn’t necessarily mean all the reasons we disliked our old job will just disappear.

The things that bugged us about our old girlfriend or boyfriend or house or church don’t all automatically go away when we find a new one.

Often, it takes more than a simple transition...a new haircut...to experience real change, doesn't it?

Why is that?

Well, because sometimes...wherever we go and whatever we do, the things that bother us the most may well be things we're carrying with us ourselves...things that we don't even realize we're carrying.

Sometimes the issues that frustrate us are more about us than they are about our circumstance...our surroundings.

But of course it's far easier to blame circumstance than it is to do a real honest dive into our own selves and expectations, and so many people go from place to place and person to person expecting to find clean slates, while the fact is...the problem is us.

Some of us have expectations about jobs that no job could ever meet, because the problem isn't in the job. The problem is in us.

Some people have expectations of homes, neighborhoods, churches and towns that no home, neighborhood church or town, this side of Heaven anyway, will ever fulfill.

Some people have expectations of other people...of a husband or wife or a friend or a colleague or employer or employee that even Jesus couldn't meet.

We carry these unrealistic expectations around with us, thinking they'll be fulfilled with the next move...and of course they aren't.

But...it's hard and demanding work to confront our own issues...to be vulnerable with ourselves, so instead of doing that, we keep piling our disappointments on anything and everyone around us...trying to find clean slates by changing everything and everyone...except us.

Are you like that...even a little? Are you what's standing in the way of your own clean slate?

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Now...this guy...this guy who came to Jesus here...he wasn't like that. He didn't blame his troubles on anyone else. He knew that his problem was his own...and it was a real big problem.

Leprosy was an awful disease...in some ways similar to cancer or diabetes today, except that the effects were very public...very obvious. There were visible ulcers, a terrible smell, the loss of feeling, and then the loss of extremities themselves.

And it was incurable...but also slow. You died by inches, usually over the course of 20 to 30 years.

In the middle ages, when a person was diagnosed with leprosy, the priest gave them last rights there and then...that's how much hope you had for life.

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But the leper's loss was not just physical.

In Jesus' day, leprosy cut people off from society.

Those with leprosy were barred from all cities with walls around them...they couldn't come in. In villages or in the countryside, they had to live apart from everyone else, they had to wear certain clothes, and they had to call out "Unclean" as they passed by other people.

The closest you could get to a person with leprosy was 6 feet. No closer.

No disease has ever any more isolated and decimated a person.

So this man's problem was real and it was his own and he knew it. He did not blame his problem on others.

To have a clean slate, he knew he needed something in him to change.

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At the same time, this man also knew that Jesus could do something to change him.

As realistic as he was about his own problem, he was somehow equally realistic about Jesus' ability to affect it.

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The truth is, it's something of a mystery as to how this fellow's faith in Jesus was so developed. Though this account is repeated in three of the four gospels, it comes very early in all of them, so it's not like this guy had seen Jesus do dozens and dozens of miracles...over months or even years.

Maybe, as a good Jew would, he'd heard the tales of centuries before, when God, through Elisha, healed Naaman...an Aramean fellow...of the very same affliction. Maybe he figured that if God could heal a gentile, then certainly He could heal a Jew.

We don't know, but regardless, he spoke with that calm confidence of real faith, there in verse 2, where he says, "***Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.***"

***"Lord, you can do this. I know you can do this."***

For whatever reason, there is no question in the man...attached to Jesus' ***ability***.

But...there was a question in the man about Jesus' willingness.

***"Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."***

You know, this was one bright guy.

Not only was He convinced that Jesus could heal, he also understood something about the theology of healing that many people miss today. This fellow understood that God was not his own, personal vending machine in the sky, or some robot or computer program that processes all requests according to some set formula; "if this, then that. If I say this, then God will do that;" and so on.

No, this fellow understood that God is a person with a will...a good, pleasing and perfect will, yes, but also...a will that we don't always understand.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 12:2

That's why he says what he does to Jesus. The man knew that if Jesus *would*...if Jesus was *willing*, then He *could* make him clean.

And he simply says as much to Jesus.

This is the application of 1 John 5:14, where John says, "***This is the confidence we have in prayer...in asking of God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.***"

We find this same idea...the same phrase, actually, in Luke 12:47, a parable Jesus told about a servant who did not act "***according to his master's will,***" and so received judgment; and also in Hebrews 2:4, where we're told that the gifts of God's Spirit are distributed "***according to His will.***"

The fact is, God does not simply give us absolutely anything we ask for, no matter what. Certainly He hears our prayers, but it should come as no surprise to us that He responds to our prayers according to His good, pleasing and perfect will.

And faith...real faith...means understanding and embracing that.

I mean, what is faith in God? What does it mean to put our faith...our trust...in God?

Doesn't it mean that we trust that God is, not only way more powerful than we are, but also way smarter...wiser...than us?

I don't want to put my trust in someone who knows less than me. Why would I do that?

Doesn't faith in God mean that we believe that God's judgment is sharper than ours,

that His timing is better than ours,

that His purposes are often beyond what we can comprehend,

and that God's reasons are good, no matter how He does what He does seems to us?

That's real, grown-up faith, and that's the sort of faith that this fellow with leprosy here had in Jesus.

He knew Jesus *could* give him a clean slate...and so He asked if He *would*...and then...he left the details to Jesus.

And Jesus gave to him the best five-word answer ever given; "***I am willing. Be clean.***"

***"And immediately,"*** verse three says, "***he was cleansed from his leprosy.***"

A clean slate. No one ever experienced a better one than this fellow did here.

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The fact is, Jesus is all about clean slates. Second chances. New starts.

That's the whole reason God the Father sent Him...to provide all who will come to Him with a clean slate.

Now, does the clean slate always come right when we want it? No.

Do they always come in the way we expect them? No.

Do they always come according to our timing? No.

But...when Jesus gives them...when He does wipe our slate clean...no matter what was on it before, it is *clean*.

Like Jesus Himself said, ***“When I set you free, you are free indeed.”***<sup>2</sup>

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A clean slate. I wonder if someone here today is ready to ask Jesus for a new start, a fresh beginning...a clean slate?

You’ve taken the first step, which is, you realize that the trouble you struggle with...whatever it is...is your own. You’re not living in denial. You’re not blaming someone else. You know that the issue is yours and you need Jesus, *not* to fix someone *else*, but to fix *you*.

That’s the first step toward a clean slate.

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The second is that you really believe...you trust that Jesus can actually do something about your problem. You are convinced that Jesus is powerful enough to fix what’s broken...to clean whatever it is that’s dirty in your life.

Even if you’re not 100% convinced, you’re willing to say, like the guy in Mark 9 who brought his sick son to Jesus, ***“Jesus, help me overcome my unbelief!”***<sup>3</sup>

You believe...or sincerely want to believe...that Jesus *can* give you a clean slate. That’s the second requirement.

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And then third, you’re willing to submit to God’s will for how and when it happens.

You’re ready to admit that *God’s timing* and *method* and *manner* is better than anything that you or I could ever come up with on our own. You’re good with letting Him call the shots about what happens next.

It seems to be that, for a clean slate, it takes all three:

- 1) The problem’s mine.
- 2) God can fix it.
- 3) But in His way and time.

If you’re there this morning...if you’re ready, why not come to Jesus, just like this guy did, and say, ***“Lord, if you’re willing, you can make me clean.”***

It doesn’t matter what your trouble is. You can entrust it to Jesus, because Jesus never, ever tires of hearing those words, spoken in real trust and faith, from people.

***“Lord, if you’re willing, you can make me clean.”***

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<sup>2</sup> John 8:36

<sup>3</sup> Mark 9:24

Now, let me also say, there is *one* clean slate that Jesus will *always* give *immediately*, and that is when we admit to Him that we've sinned against Him...we've done things that do not please Him, and that we need His forgiveness.

The sins we commit...the ways we live that are contrary to God's ways...they bring complications and frustrations and troubles into our lives...and into the lives of others. They mess up our slates...and sometimes those consequences remain...they are not cleaned up quickly.

But...the biggest way sin dirties our slate is that it creates a barrier between us and God...it separates us from the God who made us...and for that...Jesus always offers immediate forgiveness...forgiveness that removes the barrier that our sin created. The clean slate Jesus always and immediately gives is restored relationship with God.

If we'll see that 1) the sin is ours and, 2) that Jesus can forgive...for that sort of clean slate, there's never a question of, "Will He?"

Jesus is always willing to give us a clean slate where our relationship with God is concerned.

All we have to do is come to Him with real repentance...sorrow for our sins...and ask for His forgiveness.

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Hey, are you looking for a clean slate of some sort this morning?

With regard to some conflict or trouble or illness in your life?

Maybe you've never asked Jesus to forgive your sin and allow a relationship with God to begin.

If you are looking for a clean slate, why not follow this fellow's example? Why not ask Jesus?

### **Closing Prayer:**

"Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus, we believe that about You. Would you make it so in our lives today? Where a slate is filled, distorted, messed up, would you make it clean, such that we'd have a fresh start?

And especially so, Jesus, if there is someone here who has not received Your forgiveness for the things they've done that go against your will. Jesus, forgive them and restore their relationship with God the Father...give them the most important of all clean slates here today, we ask...

### **Closing Song:**

### **Closing Word:**

To a Jew of Jesus' day, there would be no more amazing sentence in the New Testament than the statement, "*Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper.*" You had to stay away 6-feet because chances are you couldn't touch someone from 6-feet away.

To a person living in sin...living apart from God, there is no more amazing sentence in the New Testament than Jesus statement, "*I am willing – be clean.*"

May we know the Lord's willingness with regard to our relationship with God. And may we ask Him for a clean slate that He may give that to us in His time and in His way.

Thank you for coming to worship today.

The Lord bless you and keep you.

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