

When God Touches the Untouchables¹



by Edward T. Welch

What follows is a chapter from my book *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection*. I love the biblical truths captured here. Scripture speaks to our shame in many ways. God knows your name—that certainly takes aim at worthlessness and shame. He invites you to a fellowship meal—what a great honor! But, most intimate of all, he touches you on purpose and expects you to touch him back. Given some of the touch moments in the New Testament, Jesus is quite comfortable with messy hugs. He is not ashamed to touch the unclean, to touch those who feel like they are untouchables. What could be better?

Please enjoy this reality of Jesus' hands-on care. It is no mere metaphor, as in "what Jesus has done is like what happens in a very meaningful touch." It is more this: Have you ever received a safe and loving touch that made you feel included, a touch of care and kindness that was just plain good? The enjoyment of that experience is a signpost to this greater spiritual reality.

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Jesus succeeded spectacularly in his goal of associating with outcasts. By the time he gathered the twelve disciples, he was already

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known as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners." He pursued the dregs—those who would make you unclean—and he ate with them, a huge misstep in Hebrew society.

"Friend of tax collectors." Tax collectors were the servants of Rome, so they were unclean whether they were Jew or Gentile. But Jesus made one of them—Matthew—a part of his inner circle.

"Friend of Sinners." *Sinners* meant "the really bad (or different) people who are not us." They included people who were known by their sins: Joe the Divorcer, Jane the Adulteress, Jim the Thief. And they included those who were physically handicapped or abused: Jack the Blind, Jane the Molested. "Sinners" had everyone gossiping. But Jesus sought them out, and they sought him out. He was their friend, and happy to touch them.

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and *sinners* came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and *sinners*?" (Matt 9:9–11, emphasis mine; also see Matt 11:19; Luke 15:1–2)

Remember Isaiah's vision of the King?

It was a frightful event filled with rumblings, smoke, and the refrain, “Holy, holy, holy” (Is 6). The most shocking feature of the scene was the seraphim, a representative of the King, coming on the King’s behalf to touch Isaiah’s tongue with a live coal, which symbolized his purification. The people of Israel had come to expect God to be close—but not too close. Certainly, no one expected to touch God or be touched by him. Certainly no one would eat with God. But Isaiah was pointing to the time when God would come closer than we could imagine. And who could have imagined he would insist on touching the untouchables?

The Meaning of Touch

Every day we touch other people. How many? Dozens? If you live in a city and take public transportation, you touch hundreds of people. But there are different kinds of touches. The inadvertent touches are meaningless. You might apologize if you accidentally bump someone; otherwise, you don’t even think of all the unintentional contact you have with other human beings.

I have a friend who is as far from touchy-feely as you can get. He likes his space. His emotional range is . . . restricted. When a surgical procedure went badly, he landed in the hospital for over three weeks. During that time he had a small but steady group of visitors. I don’t think a day passed without someone stopping in to visit and pray with him. But after he recovered he couldn’t stop talking about one particular visitor. It was an older man. I don’t remember how they knew each other—probably a friend of a friend.

This man came in the hospital room, sat on the bed, and held my friend’s hand. He held it for what would normally be considered an uncomfortably long time. He just sat there and held his hand. This older man was the first person to touch my hospitalized friend in weeks. And while my friend was telling me this story, tears were rolling down his cheeks. Naturally, that made me want to hug him, but I decided to save it for the next time he was in the hospital.

We hear about a baby’s need for human contact. Apparently that need extends to crotchety middle-aged men too, though mere skin-to-skin contact will not do. We want *purposeful*, meaningful touch, not the professional touch of someone taking our blood pressure or inserting a new IV.

I remember the first time I touched my wife. I might have touched her fifty times before I actually touched her, but none of them counted. The first time I touched her with intent, I took her hand, and I think she touched me back. When you love someone, you touch them.

For those who feel untouchable, have you noticed that your shame fades away when someone else touches you intentionally, in love?

Yet not all touch is good. There is another kind of touch that is purposeful and intended to harm. If you have been cruelly hit by someone who is supposed to love you, something happened in that touch. You were shamed. If you were touched sexually by someone you didn’t want to touch you, you discovered one of the laws of intentional touch—it lingers much longer than the physical act. It can create an association that is hard to break. In fact, it cannot be broken apart from a good touch that erases and replaces the old.

Old Testament Touching

Scripture is all about touch, though you might not see that in an initial reading. In the Old Testament, touch can seem very confusing. Some of it can be very good. For example, if you are a priest and you touched the consecrated altar (consecration is the God-given method of making something holy), the holiness rubbed off on you and you were made holy, at least temporarily (Ex 29:37). In a later story, some Israelites were burying a man and hurriedly threw his body into Elisha’s tomb to avoid a band of robbers. As a prophet, Elisha had been set apart by God to serve him, so he would be called holy. As soon as the dead man’s body touched Elisha’s bones, the dead man immediately came to life and stood up (2 Kings 13:21). Touch, indeed, could be a good thing.

Picture Aaron the high priest, laying his hands on the scapegoat—an actual live goat—and confessing over it the people’s wickedness. Somehow, God ordained that in Aaron’s purposeful touch, sins would be transferred from the people to another living creature. In this case, the transfer was a great blessing to the people. The goat, not the people, would carry the weight of the sin (Lev 16:20–22).

Picture the prophet Elisha, spread-eagled over a dead boy. It seems as if it took a *lot* of touching to raise the dead.

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the Lord. Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. (2 Kings 4:32–34)

In the Old Testament, touch was usually a good thing, but you still had to be careful. When God came to Mount Sinai to meet with his people, they had to ritually wash or consecrate themselves according to God's directions.

but Jesus made time for the leper. Men and women like him were Jesus' people. Then, instead of healing this man simply by saying a word, he purposefully touched him, though *touching* was completely unnecessary. All it accomplished was to make Jesus himself ceremonially unclean. Jesus could have avoided this but it was part of his plan.

As you consider this story, stop for a minute. Bring it close. Make it personal to you. Every person who knows shame should be captured by this story. All you need in order to make it your own is to feel utterly worthless and deserving of rejection.

The New Testament specializes in good touch. With Jesus there is a lot of touching going on, and it is all good.

Even then, if one uninvited person touched the mountain, he or she would be put to death with stones or arrows. No one was allowed to touch that person (Ex 19:10–13). Years later, when the ark of God was recovered from an enemy and returned to Israel, it teetered when one of the oxen pulling its cart stumbled. Uzzah instinctively reached out to steady the sacred object and died immediately (2 Sam 6:6–7). Touch could be a very dangerous thing.

There are ways to make sense out of these events. For now, it is enough to know that touch has a deeper meaning. Get touched at the wrong time by the wrong person and you at least became unclean. Perhaps you'd even die. Get touched at the right time by the right person, and you come to life.

The Purposeful Touch of Jesus

The New Testament specializes in good touch. With Jesus there is a lot of touching going on, and it is all good. Don't be distracted by the crowds pressing in on him. Keep an eye out for the intentional touch he invites from and extends to his favorites: the lame, blind, leprous, discarded, and sinful.

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (Matt 8:1–3)

There were many people pressing in on him,

Let the leper lead you. When you encounter a New Testament story, the heroes are typically the tax collectors, unclean people, and neighborhood failures. They understand Jesus. Take your cue from them. This man is one of the first heroes you can emulate.

Can you say, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean"? It doesn't count if you nod your head with the leper but can't say it out loud.

Can you say it? I know it isn't easy. But this leper is one of the first heroes in the new kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. You are being asked to follow in his footsteps with something similarly heroic. Of course, his heroism is a gift. The Spirit of the living God gave him the power to say such a thing. You will need that power too.

Can you say it? If not, ask God for help or . . . just say it! If you can say it, be amazed that God has come close to you and given you more power than you know.

Next, do you believe it? Do you believe that Jesus responds, "I am willing, be clean"? At this point we should begin to expect such things. This is central to his mission statement. Do you believe what he says? If not, be careful. You are giving more authority to your worthlessness than you are to Jesus, and when you make it personal like that, it is a scary thought. You are essentially saying that Jesus is not telling you the truth. You are saying that Jesus' touch is less powerful than Elisha's. So believe.

Now back to Jesus, the Touching-King. He touched the eyes of a blind man and he could see (Matt 9:28–30; 20:34). He touched Peter's

sick mother-in-law and her fever left (Matt 8:14–15). He was touched by a disgraced woman, and he praised her for understanding that he was the Approachable King who cleansed by forgiving sins. In forgiving her sins he took away her deepest shame (Luke 7:36–48). In a curious variation on this touching theme, Jesus approached a deaf and mute man, placed his fingers in the man’s ears, spit on his finger, and *touched the man’s tongue* (Mark 7:31–35). There is no denying his willingness to get down and dirty after that. Before long, all the sick and demon-afflicted tried to touch him “for power came out from him and healed them all” (Luke 6:19).

Best known of these stories was the woman who had been sick with twelve years of bleeding. She was clearly unclean and untouchable.

As Jesus went, the people pressed around him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. And Jesus said, “Who was it that touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!” But Jesus said, “Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me.” And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.” (Luke 8:42–48)

There was lots of jostling and bumping in this crowded village— lots of inadvertent touch. The woman’s touch, however, was highly intentional. It is no wonder that the woman was embarrassed when her action was made public. The law prohibited her from touching others but desperation makes you do things you otherwise wouldn’t do. As it happens, desperation is one of the main ingredients of faith. Faith means you need healing, you can’t do it yourself, and you are confident that Jesus is the hands-on Healer.

Hmm. Are you willing to contaminate the King? Are you desperate enough? Do you know he invites you to touch him? These are

not easily answered questions. Scripture is offering you a second hero, or heroine in this case. She is the first to be called a person of faith. Imitate her actions, hear the questions Jesus asked, and confess publicly with her why you touched him. And don’t worry about making him unclean. He is the Holy One, and holiness trumps uncleanness.

Faith is your response to Jesus. He makes the first move. He makes a beeline toward you. Then you do something. When he moved toward the leper, the man said, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean” (Luke 5:12). Another man with leprosy threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him (Luke 17:16). This woman touched him, and in that touch she acknowledged that Jesus was the One sent from the Father. He was, in fact, “the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious” (Ex 34:6).

How will you respond? “Yes, Lord, I believe” is fine, but you can see that early men and women of faith put their own personal flourishes to their response.

Before you move on from this story, Luke connects it to one more. The two stories are linked by “while [Jesus] was still speaking . . .” (Luke 8:49). In the first story Jesus was touched by the bleeding woman; in the second he intentionally touched a corpse. The result: Jesus was contaminated, a woman was healed; a dead girl was given life, stood up, and got something to eat. Apparently, Jesus’ touch and his invitation to us to touch him back are essential parts of the Good News.

Touch and Power

When Jesus touched or was purposefully touched, there was a lot happening. He was showing his solidarity with outcasts. He was identifying with them. Of that there is no doubt. When you see people purposefully touching, you know they are at least good friends. But if that’s all Jesus did, it would have been a nice but empty gesture. The outcasts would have felt temporary comfort but no real change in status. So there was much more happening. The accumulating references to “power” give it away.

With every intentional touch there was a transaction being made. “Power” goes out from Jesus to the person who was touched. Splice together various Scriptures and you will see that power is a loaded term that includes:

- holiness conferred (consecration)
- forgiveness of sins
- cleansing and purification
- healing
- identification with Jesus' status.

Meanwhile, the unclean person gave something to Jesus, the scapegoat. He or she gave

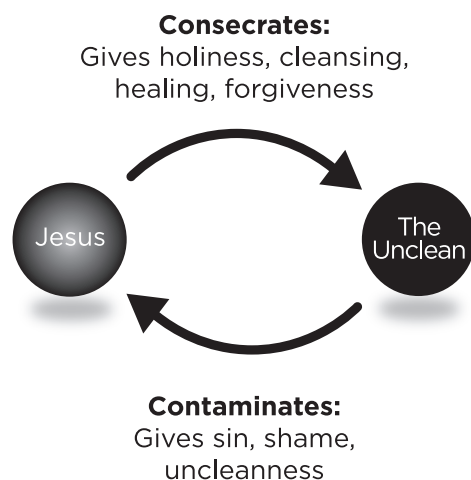
- sins
- shameful acts
- victimization and its contamination
- disease.

This is the gospel: God touches us. All the talk about cleanness and uncleanness points to this divine touch. This is what the universe itself was waiting for. It is an unbalanced transaction that displaces our shame and replaces it with holiness. The apostle Paul put it this way: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). With our touch, Jesus becomes our scapegoat. In his touch, Jesus takes our sin and absorbs our shame (Ps 69:9; Rom 15:3), and we receive his righteousness. If you prefer symmetry in your relationships, in which you give a gift of similar value to the one you receive, you have not yet touched Jesus.

This is faith: we reach out and touch the Holy One. Faith means we believe that the kingdom of God has come to us in Christ. It means we believe there is hope in Jesus and only in him. It means we believe that rescue, healing, covering, acceptance, and cleansing are possible, and possible only in Jesus. Faith—or touching Jesus—means saying, "Jesus, I need you."

It sounds easy but, like all things spiritual, faith is evidence of supernatural power at work in us. Left to ourselves, we instinctively turn inward rather than put our trust and confidence in Jesus. You know this instinct. We call it self-protection, though it is more accurately called unbelief.

Shame has a natural affinity with self-protection and unbelief. It hides from others, feels undeserving of anything good, and believes it will contaminate whatever comes close. But look at what happened when Jesus came. Unclean people suddenly were filled with hope. Instead of hiding from the world, they became indifferent to the derision of the relatively clean



townspeople and boldly went out to see Jesus. When they saw him, they felt compelled to touch him because they understood that their salvation was near. They came alive!

Watch them as they sit in the filth of their daily lives. Watch them as they hear rumors of someone who cares and has power. Watch them stand up when they receive news that Jesus is approaching. Watch their steps quicken when they hear the crowd. Watch them become an unstoppable force when they see him. Don't get in the way of someone who is both desperate and hopeful when the King is near.

These are the men and women of faith.

Join them. Don't be one who happens to bump into Jesus in a crowded marketplace. Instead, join those who purposefully touched him.

Please, join them.

For discussion

1. You have undoubtedly known cruel touch. Have you ever experienced meaningful, personal touch that temporarily broke through your shame?
2. Have you ever run from Jesus' touch? Why?
3. Have you ever run toward him to touch him?

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