

Luke 17:11-17

Sunday, Date
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance ¹³ and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." ¹⁴ When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; ¹⁶ and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

We are not very familiar with leprosy here in this day and age and in this country. Of course, we've heard about leprosy and lepers many times, since we read our Bibles, but we're not actually *familiar* with it. That is because, I would guess, just about all of us have never seen it. Well, it's not great.

Leprosy is an infection caused by a certain bacterium that can be transmitted via droplets from the nose and mouth during prolonged, months-long close contact between individuals. The transmitted bacteria will cause an infection that will attack the nerves, the respiratory tract, the skin, and the eyes. And, if you ever see a leper, you'd likely know it right away. People deformed by leprosy will often be missing eyes, ears, nose, lips. They'll beg with handless arms, while sitting on footless legs.

Historically, lepers were considered to be the living dead, and you can understand why. Their appearance was ashen, pale, white—like a corpse. Their flesh was continually falling from their bodies. Their breath emitted a stench that resembled a decaying carcass. They were the living *dead*. And thus, the Jews considered them, like a corpse, to be unclean, untouchable. To be avoided. And I imagine that for lepers, this last part—that isolation—must have been the most difficult to bear.

A very close family friend, whom I considered to be my third grandma, died during the very early days of COVID. And she was ready to depart and be with the Lord, death didn't *scare* her. But the most *difficult* part of her departure—for her, for her family—was that as she lay there in the hospital bed in her final days, her family could only visit from the other side of a glass window. She could see them, she could hear them and talk with them through a telephone, but she could not touch them. No closeness, no hugs, no final kisses goodbye. And that type of isolation is absolutely *horrible*. And this was the *everyday reality* for the ten lepers in our text.

"The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp." (Leviticus 13:45-46) This was the Levitical statute regarding leprosy. No touching. No holding. No closeness to *anyone*, not even your family.

That being the case, I think I can begin to understand why the nine men in our text for today didn't come back. Not only were they healed of their dreaded disease, not only were they following to the letter Jesus' directions by going directly to the priests, but you see the faster they got done with those priests and had their condition verified, the faster they would be able to get home. Home! Where they could recline at the table, surrounded by family and laughter and love and closeness once more.

And that's the problem. The gifts that God gives us in this life are so wonderful and so amazing and so *fulfilling*, that we often forget about the Giver. If I try to put myself in the shoes of these lepers and ask myself, "What would keep me from going back with that tenth man and saying thank you to Jesus," the answer I keep coming up with is this: it would be my joy in being restored to my family. The most *natural* thing for me to do in this situation would be to make a beeline back to my home and scoop up my boys and embrace my wife and rejoice in our shared joy at being reunited. That would be the most *natural* thing for me to do. And it would be *wrong*.

It would be wrong, because that course of action would be emphasizing the gifts and not the Giver. Wrong because it would keep me from Jesus and from the greater gifts that He desires to give. You see, my friends, while it is true that *at times* we are unthankful, I think that generally speaking, our biggest problem is not that we're unthankful. It's not that we're thankful for the wrong things either, since God's countless gifts of earthly blessings are deserving of our thanks. I think that our *problem* is that we become so satisfied with the blessings that come down from above every day that we lose sight of both the Giver and His greater gifts. And we see that situation play out in this miracle; nine went their way focusing only on the healing, one returned and received the greater gift.

Now, Jesus did something interesting in the way He performed this miracle. He didn't say, "I am willing, be cleansed," so that the leprosy left them immediately. He had done that sort of thing at other times and could have done so here. But He didn't do that. He didn't put his hands on them so that they were cleansed at His touch. He could have done that, but He didn't. Instead, He said, "**Go and show yourselves to the priests.**" You see, we read earlier the laws regarding what to do if you *had* leprosy, there were also a series of laws for what you were to do if you thought that your disease was gone. First, you were to show yourselves to the priests. Not that they were medical experts or anything like that, but they were the people who determined whether or not this disease was gone.

And there's an implied promise in Jesus' words here and the way He chose to heal them. The implied promise is that by the time they arrive before the priests, they're going to be healed. And the thing that's interesting about that is that, the manner of this miracle, it calls forth faith. It requires them, to some degree, to believe what He had said, since the results weren't something they could see yet.

It reminds me of our Old Testament reading with Naaman. He was a Syrian general, and he had leprosy. He also had a servant girl who told him that there was a prophet in Israel, a prophet of the one true God who could heal his leprosy. So, Naaman went down and comes to Elisha, and Elisha doesn't even come out to greet him! He simply sends out a servant who says, "**Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.**" (2 Kings 5:10)

And Naaman was a little upset about this. He had expected Elisha to come out and do something impressive, wave his arms or something. But instead, Elisha just told him to bathe in the Jordan River, which in Naaman's estimation, wasn't *nearly* as good as some of the rivers in his own country! But his servant reasoned with him that he had come to hear what the prophet had to say, so he might as well listen to what the prophet had to say. And so Naaman did what he was told, and he was healed.

If Naaman had not believed that word at all and had *not* gone and done what he was told, he never would have been healed. And the same is true of these ten lepers. If they just thought, "It's too good

to be true,” and refused to go to the priests, they wouldn’t have been healed on the way. Jesus tied His miracle to His Word in order to bring forth faith—faith, at least, that He could heal them.

But only *one* of them saw this miracle taking place and understood what it meant. Like Naaman, who after he was healed returned to Elisha and confessed, **“Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel,”** (2 Kings 5:15) so this one Samaritan saw in his healing this beam of heavenly light and traced it back to its source. This foreigner returned and believed about Jesus something that the others completely missed. Notice, it says, he **“turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.”** He now understood and *believed* that Jesus was God.

And in response, Jesus says, **“Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”** Actually, the text *literally* says, **“Your faith has saved you.”** And I think the translators saw the word and decided on **“made you well”** because it’s a healing text. But that’s not what Jesus said. You know how we know that? Because all ten of them were made well, but only *one* returned in faith. The tenth man saw beyond the gift to the Giver. And in returning to Christ, he received the greatest gift of all. Faith in Christ saved him.

Now, brothers and sisters-in-Christ, we are so easily satisfied. We opt for the lesser gifts of God and lose sight of the greater. We talked about this a few weeks ago in Bible Class, during our study of the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Luther wrote, *“It’s like a time when the richest and most mighty emperor would tell a poor beggar to ask whatever he might desire. The emperor was ready to give great, royal presents. But the fool would only beg for a dish of gruel.”* (The Large Catechism) And we do the same with God. We’re interested in health, He’s trying to give us heaven. We’re interested in happiness, He’s trying to make us holy. We’re looking for friendship, He’s providing fellowship with Himself through the cross and empty tomb. We’re looking to cope, He wants to make us conquerors. We’re looking for band-aids, and, all the while, He’s trying to dispense the full-blown cure.

What the tenth man figured out, what Jesus drew attention to, and what we can learn here, is that the closer we get to the One who is the source of every good and perfect gift, the greater are the gifts. So, how does it happen? How do we draw close enough to Jesus to *receive* the greater gifts? Well, how did it work for *this* man? He didn’t know intuitively that Jesus was the Son of God; instead, Jesus gave him a Word of promise to hold on to. A Word that opened his eyes, a Word that directed his footsteps to God. And Jesus has done the same for you.

He gives that to you *here*. Words of promise, words for *you* to hold on to. Words delivered to you from the One whose arms are right now outstretched to you in blessing. Words of forgiveness, of peace, of redemption. Words that proclaim that *you* are not guilty. Words that announce a future for you, a future at your Savior’s side. Without *Him* speaking to you, you would have nothing but *horrible isolation*. Separation from God for all eternity, *ultimate* loneliness. But because Jesus gives you His Word, because Jesus has washed you in Baptismal waters, because Jesus offers you His body and His blood—now, you have received the *greater* gifts.

And with them, you’ve also received many lesser gifts. Whether it’s a child’s smile, or a beautiful sunrise, or a hearty meal around the table with family. Each of those are the *lesser* gifts—yet still gifts to be thankful for and still gifts to rejoice in, because they’re gifts that direct you back to the Giver.

Paul writes, ***“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”*** (Romans 8:32) In other words, all those good things that you have and that you enjoy and that are so fulfilling, they’re because of Jesus. They are small tokens of God’s abounding love. They’re like little slivers of the cross, the cross by which you have been brought near to God. Receive those things with thanksgiving, with your hearts set on the Giver and not the gifts.

The tenth man figured that out. He got Jesus right. And he went away with more than he could have ever hoped for. And so do we. For Jesus has seen to it that we receive Him who suffered and died and rose again for us. That we receive Him who sought us and bought us so that we could be His own and live under Him in His kingdom. That we receive Him who has so outrageously blessed us, that we cannot even come close to comprehending His great love for us.

And what is the Christian’s response to this kind of outrageous grace and love and mercy that we have received? What is *our* response? Here it is:

*“Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee...”*

“Take my hands...”

“Take my feet...”

“Take my voice...”

“Take my money...”

“Take everything, dear Lord. Take all my gifts. For you have made me Your own, Jesus. Now, Your goals for my life are my goals for my life. All that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to be, I give to you, dear Lord.”

And Jesus smiles, and says to you, ***“Rise and go your way; your faith has saved you.”*** Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.