

Giving Thanks For The God Of Grace: Thanksgiving 2011

Luke 17:11-19

¹¹ 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." (ESV)

This is a famous story. Jesus, by this time, is now heading toward Jerusalem for what he knows is not just the conclusion of his ministry, but for what will be his death on the cross. In fact, on this Thanksgiving Day, the day before Black Friday, you could say that what he is doing is going to Jerusalem to purchase something – the bible word is redeem – so that he can give a gift. And like we've been studying in Romans for the last two months, not just to give a gift to *some* people. But *all* people. Jesus is even walking, you see, through *Samaria*. Which no pious Jew would have done.

And as he does, there are ten men who come to meet him, but from a distance. And Luke tells you exactly why that distance is important. They are lepers.

Leprosy was one of just many diseases back then, just like cancer is today. But *like* cancer today, leprosy was a "paradigmatic" disease. So, just like somebody might say, "I'm havin' a bad day, but it's not like I've got cancer," back then you would have said, "Hey, at least I don't have leprosy."

Cancer is a symbol for dealing with the possibility of death, and leprosy was theirs. It had become a universal symbol of uncleanness. It came to symbolize both the curse of death on sin, and also our guilt before God as sinners. You see, it symbolized our pollution by sin, and the curse and judgment *on* that sin.¹

Leprosy is a pretty good symbol for sin! Sin, like leprosy, requires healing which can only come from outside you. No one has ever cured themselves of leprosy just like no one can or ever will be able to cure themselves of sin. And sin, like leprosy, is systemic; it's something that infects our entire humanity – body, soul, spirit, mind. Sin pervades everything like a virus or a bacterial disease. And like a disease, it cannot be ignored. For if you ignore it, then it only gets worse.

¹Leviticus 13:45-52

⁴⁵"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.' ⁴⁶He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp. (See also Leviticus 14)

Now you can try and treat sin the way some might treat a skin disease – that is, you can simply treat the symptoms – a sin here or a sin there. We're prone to do that, you know – treat the symptoms.

We think of sin as bad things we do – our thefts, our divisions, our greed, our gossip, our angry words, our hateful thoughts, our pride, our prejudices, our envy, our adulteries. All of those are the *symptoms*, just as headache, fever, and a runny nose are symptoms of a cold or the flu. But treating the symptoms *doesn't* get rid of the disease, does it? Some of you have been nursing this cold and flu thing for over a month. You get better for a while, and you think it's gone, and then ... it's back again for round two or three. Sometimes we think that sin is just a matter of working on this or that little bit of our lives. Treat the symptoms one by one. And while symptom relief is good, and *will* make you feel better, it won't cure the disease.

Jesus knows all about this. It's why he's going to Jerusalem, instead of just setting up shop for a very successful healing ministry.

And as he walks along, he sees these lepers who must remain apart from the general population.

Recently my family watched the classic film *Ben-Hur*, and in the movie they do a nice depiction of a Leper colony, where this group of people suffer as aliens from the rest of society, and who must cry out "unclean, unclean" if any one comes to close to them, who cannot enter the temple, who cannot draw near to God. And the only thing they really have, is fellowship with one another. Waiting to die.

The reason the unclean leper must be excluded from the tent of meeting is given back in Leviticus, and there we are told that it's because God walks in the midst of the tent. That because God dwells there, all uncleanness must be avoided in the tent.

But here in Luke, we have the Son of God, the holy one himself, moving near the colony, and in their midst, such that he could be seen by the lepers.

But instead of shouting, "unclean, unclean," they call out, "Jesus, Master... have mercy on us."

Maybe they have already heard that Jesus has healed one leper already, back in Luke 5. Maybe they have heard that the *way* he healed that leper was by putting his hands upon the man. And in fact, far from making Jesus himself unclean by touching a leper, it is Jesus' touch that made *that man* clean. This is a cry for salvation.

Now this passage is not uncommon to hear at Thanksgiving. Because after all, the focus is on what Jesus says to this one man who fell on his face at Jesus' feet, gave him thanks.

But is that what's really going on here? Simply encouraging us to give thanks to God, and we will be blessed? And is the situation here that the other nine, who *do* get healed... that they don't believe, and only the one who returns has his faith recognized, because he came back and gave thanks? They were all healed whether they gave thanks or not – their healing was not based on how they would respond – all cried out for mercy and all were healed.

To put it another way, are we to believe that the other nine were healed from years of being outcasts and unclean... but were not thankful?

I don't think so. I think they were *very* thankful to have been healed. I bet they went to the priests and were overjoyed – now they could go to the temple! That's why Jesus sends them back to the priest – so that they can be received back into fellowship at the Temple. And in fact, they all go to the temple in faith because they are healed *while on their way* to the temple. They went to the temple because they were told to even before their skin changed, and obviously believed what Jesus said would happen, would *actually* happen – they *would* be made clean.

No, I bet they went home to their families with tears of joy, and hugged wives and children they hadn't seen in years. I think they were thankful alright.²

It's just after all of this, *nine of them got lost in the healing, and missed the healer.*

In fact – and again, I hope you hear echoes of our study in Romans – maybe the Samaritan had a slight advantage here. You see, 9 of the 10 lepers, apparently, are Jews. Now when they all had leprosy, they had perfect communion with one another. Right? Because they were all sinners, inside and out, unclean to everyone. Sin makes all people exactly alike.

However, when Jesus heals them, an old dividing line becomes clear. On the outside, with the symptom of their sin cured, they are no longer men with a common disease. They are Jews and a Gentile – nine are Jews, but one is a Samaritan. And a Samaritan would never be welcome at the temple, unclean *or* cleansed. "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."³ Had this man gone to the temple, even with skin like a baby's bottom, he would have been stoned. He has nowhere else to go to give thanks or sacrifice or worship. He has nowhere to go but Jesus.

In fact, the word Jesus uses for this man in v. 18, "foreigner" (ἄλλογενής) is only used only once in the entire New Testament – right here. It literally means "other born." It is this one Leper who is "other born," a stranger, of another race, someone who in reality could not do what Jesus told him to do. Because the only other known recorded use of the word "other born" in all of history was used on a sign at the temple in Jerusalem. It was the famous Jerusalem Temple inscription which roughly stated, "no one other born may go in or out."⁴ So this one Leper could not go to the Temple built by the hands of man to be healed, to be cleansed, to be verified as ritually clean.

The irony here is that when the man turns back to Jesus to worship and give thanks, he fulfills the command of Jesus in a way that the others cannot even dream of. Because here is THE priest. He goes before the high priest of the *whole world*, the one who will not only go to Jerusalem to make a sacrifice, but he himself will *be* that sacrifice.

² There is a possibility that the nine were afraid to go back and identify themselves with Jesus, who by now was a marked man.

³ John 4:9

⁴ μηδένα ἄλλογενεῖ εἰσπορεύεσθαι; See Kittel's *Vol. 1: Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964- (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (266). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, with reference to Strong Greek #241.

This Samaritan man, friends, is the picture of every Christian. He has nowhere to go but Christ. That is a great place to be. If you've ever read anything – typically it was as a kid I guess – about that first Thanksgiving, that was the attitude. We have nothing but our Lord in this new world, and he provides.

Look, the takeaway here is not, as is sometimes preached, "This guy was thankful. So YOU be thankful!" It makes me think of when my mother used to remind me to write my thank-you notes as a kid, and how I remind *my* kids to do it now: We just say, "Have you done them yet? Go do them! You got a great gift, so be thankful!" And when we say that, we just are *not* thankful. No, what we need to do is to think about the giver.

And when Jesus Christ is all, that is what you do. This foreigner receives that for which he prayed: cleansing, healing, and mercy.

And all of these blessings are available to you in the same way they were available to him – by hearing the Word of the God from *the* Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. And friends, Jesus Christ is The One who was "other born." He himself was "made man" by the speaking of the Holy Spirit into the ear of a Mary. And so it is only by the free gift of pure grace from the very lips of our Lord Jesus Christ that faith turns this "foreigner" around.

You know, before we wrap up, we need to ask, was Jesus unfair here? When he asks at the end, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine," he has to remember that *he* was the one who told them all to go to the priest at the temple... And then he seems a little torqued-off that they actually went to go see the priest! And if you go back to Leviticus, you'll see that being approved as clean from leprosy was not a simple process but there was a ritual to go through... Right? Unless there was quite a long time here in the chronology, it seems unfair that these other nine would have to take the time to do what he told them to do, but then he commends the one who didn't have to do all of that. What's up with that?

But you see, when Jesus commends the one who seems not to obey him, and appears to be critical of the 9 who do, Jesus is simply making the greater point that our hearts always turn away from God and his grace and turn TO the law. We're too busy commending our own condition through what we're told to do, then thanking the one who does it all.

The 9, when they are healed and told to see the priest are standing right in front of *the* high priest who will freely, graciously, sacrifice himself for their deeply needed cleansing, the taking away of sin... and instead they turn *to* the law of the temple and its rituals to pay for their cleansing after the fact.

It was only because the Samaritan could find no way to do the law, that he turned his back on the Mosaic law (and v. 15 says), "turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet."

Friends, that is repentance. That is faith. Faith in Christ. This man recognized who Jesus was. God. A God of grace. What *he* sees is that *Jesus* is the temple. That *Jesus* is the priest.

That *Jesus* is the sacrifice who will be offered up not just for a symptom for sin, but to atone for the sins of the whole world, and not just the Jews. That it is Jesus who declares all of us clean.

And here is where our thanks should be located. The thing to be thankful for is nothing other than Jesus. Because look – none of us can be too unclean to be cleansed and saved and loved and touched by Jesus. I don't care how bad things are. Jesus whole point is that I can cleanse you, I can save you from the very worst that society, sin, and death have to offer. And save you.

Let's pray. Let's give thanks.