

“FORMS OF PRAYER: Thanks!”

A Sermon by
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Texts: Luke 17:11-19

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Ten Healed of Leprosy

¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^a met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” ¹

Jesus is traveling again. This time, it is to Jerusalem. It will be his last trip. Jesus is on the way to the cross. Luke records that Jesus is traveling from Galilee, the area of his birth and much of his ministry and is heading south. To get to Judea, where Jerusalem is located, Jesus will, of necessity, must pass through Samaria.

Most Jews avoid traveling through Samaria if they can possibly do so. They cross to the other side of the Jordan River to avoid contact with Samaritans. The Jews despise the Samaritans. The Samaritans return the favor.

The Jews of Jesus’ time consider Samaritans genetic mongrels. They failed to keep God’s command to marry only within the Jewish race and had intermarried with Assyrian conquerors. Thus, in Jewish eyes they are perceived to be half-breeds. Samaritans are also seen as religious compromisers. They keep most of the Law. However, they do not worship in Jerusalem (as if they would be welcomed there)! Instead, they worship and sacrifice on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. The result is that Samaritans and Jews have as little contact with one another as either group can manage.

Jesus is near the border where the Jews and Samaritans interface. Borders are usually places of conflict between incompatible groups of people. Yet, here on the border between Galilee and Samaria, outside of a small village, Jesus encounters a group of ten lepers.

That is not unusual. If you encountered lepers anywhere (which travelers frequently did in Jesus’ day), it would usually be on the outskirts of towns and villages. Lepers were forbidden to enter populated areas. They lived on the fringes of society, begging what they could to survive.

We do not know whether these men all had what we now call Hansen’s Disease or whether they had some other skin malady. In Jesus’ day, all manner of skin diseases were called leprosy. We do know that their

a The Greek word was used for various diseases affecting the skin—not necessarily leprosy.

¹*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Lk 17:11-19). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

common complaint separated them from family, society, employment and the communities in which they had formerly lived. In Jesus' day, leprosy was a very lonely, debilitating disease. Leprosy made a person an outcast.

Put yourself in the place of these men. You will never give or receive a hug again. You will never shake hands with another human being. You will never hold a child in your lap. You will never go to the synagogue or Temple again. You are not welcome. You are a pariah...one to be avoided at all costs. You are a leper. You live with other lepers.

Yet the ten lepers Luke describes are no ordinary group of lepers. What makes this group of lepers unusual is that at least one of the lepers is a Samaritan. Luke's implication is that the rest are Jews. How can such a thing happen with declared enemies? It is because in the degradation of their disease, all they have is one another.

It is reported that politics makes strange bedfellows; so does disease, tragedy, disaster and physical extremity. Leprosy brings these men together. It is their common bond against which all other distinctions pale.

The ten watch the passing parade of people outside the village each day. They call to each passerby in the hope of receiving bread or alms...some expression of sympathy and mercy. Word somehow reaches them that Jesus is coming their way. This Jesus is reputed to be a healer, one who accepts the outcast...one who even dares to touch lepers.

We have no idea how they know it is Jesus. Perhaps they cry out to every passerby, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" in the hope that one of the passersby will be Jesus and will respond. Jesus hears their cry. Jesus stops.

What does Jesus do? Nothing. He doesn't approach them. He doesn't touch them. He doesn't pray for them. He doesn't wave his hand at them. He merely says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Luke then records that as they were on their way, they were healed.

Imagine the joy, the euphoria, the excitement as these men begin to see each other's skin restored to a healthy glow. There is much hilarity and laughter, I am sure, as each man head to the closest priest. Only the priest can declare them clean and restore them to their former lives.

One leper is different. Luke makes the point to let us know that one leper returns, praising God in a loud voice for his healing. He returns to thank Jesus and falls at Jesus' feet in worship. That is all we know except for one more thing...he is a Samaritan.

Were not ten healed? Why does only one return? Where are the other ten? Why didn't they return to thank Jesus?

There could be many reasons. Maybe they saw their healing as pure coincidence. After all, Jesus never touched them, Jesus never said, "Be healed," Jesus merely told them to go and show themselves to the priest. Perhaps their healing had begun before Jesus told them to see the priest. Maybe Jesus recognized this and that is why he sent them to the priest in the first place. Maybe they were just lucky. Maybe their healing was just a coincidence.

Perhaps they found it hard to believe. Miracles don't happen every day. Maybe they were afraid it wouldn't last. Maybe they just forgot. Maybe they planned to thank Jesus but were afraid they wouldn't be able to find him if they returned to the place of their healing. Maybe...the bottom line is that one leper took the trouble to find Jesus and did so. The others didn't take the trouble and failed to express any form of gratitude for their healing.

Ingratitude is a terrible thing. We know what ingratitude is. We have given gifts that go unacknowledged. We have done favors that cost us time, money and effort, yet our attempts were received indifferently.

We like the Samaritan in this story. We find it hard to like the other nine lepers. We have met them many times throughout our lives. However, don't be so quick to judge. I'll have to admit that I have probably found myself in the company of the nine more often than I have lived out the gratitude of the Samaritan. What do I mean?

Have you ever greeted someone's generosity and graciousness as if it is to be expected? Have you ever received a raise or promotion and attributed it totally to your own hard work, even though you were part of a team effort? Have you ever experienced healing and given sole credit to the doctor, the medicine, the rehabilitation program or your own efforts, but never to God? Have you prayed about something and received an answer only to chalk that answer up to coincidence? Have you gotten through a particularly rough time and come out on the other end proclaiming that things have finally fallen in place?

How many of God's blessings go unnoticed and under-appreciated in our lives? How many of our prayers are asking prayers instead of thanking prayers? How often do we attribute our lifestyle to education, hard work, good family and the right circumstances, failing to realize that we had no influence on where we would be born or the other variables that have created enormous opportunity for us? Not everyone in this world is so blessed.

I know of numerous people who go through difficult times and ask, "Why? Why did this happen? What is God doing to me? What did I do to deserve this?" Perhaps this is normal. Perhaps these are the kinds of questions that the group of ten lepers asked as they stood by the road and cried out to total strangers for help and relief.

I find myself dealing with similar yet somehow different questions. I watch the television commercials on television featuring Third World children covered with flies and suffering from kwashiorkor, their bellies swollen from malnutrition. I ask, "Why not me?" I see the homeless living on the streets and I ask, "What happened that I wasn't born as one of these? How did I end up in this wonderful land of wealth and opportunity? How did I have the privilege of good nutrition, excellent education, a body relatively free from disease and malady? How? Why?"

Too often, like the nine lepers who never returned, we receive our blessings without acknowledging their Source. We go blithely on our way, eager to get on with our lives, ignorant of the depth and magnitude of our blessings. Instead, we find ourselves whining about what we don't have, experiencing the constant dissatisfaction that prevents our enjoyment of what we have already received from God's hand.

Rarely do we dare to confess the sin of ingratitude. It is a blind spot. We fail to recognize that in so many ways we are ungrateful for blessings we take for granted. We remain indifferent to those blessings until, in one way or another, they recede from our grasp. No thanks.

Scripture is clear about the attitude that we are to have toward God. Hear just a few of the admonitions of Scripture:

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. ²

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. ³

Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ⁴

Thanksgiving was never meant to be a holiday. Why do we set aside one day a year to give thanks to God? For the Christian believer, thanksgiving should be lived out in a daily attitude of gratitude. It should impact how we live, how we spend our money, what we buy, where we go, how we treat other people (especially those in need) and what we leave behind us.

That is what true gratitude does. True gratitude is a thankful response to the goodness of a sovereign and providential God. True gratitude is living in acknowledgement of the physical and spiritual blessings of life in Jesus Christ. As it was for the Samaritan leper, returning to give thanks is a response to what God has done. It is never forgetting the Source of blessing.

Barbara Irwin knows the source of her blessings. Her story should help us remember the source of our blessings, too. She writes, "In September 1960, I woke up one morning with six hungry babies and just 75 cents in my pocket. Their father was gone.

"The boys ranged from three months to seven years; their sister was two.

"Their Dad had never been much more than a presence they feared. Whenever they heard his tires crunch on the gravel driveway they would scramble to hide under their beds. He did manage to leave 15 dollars a week to buy groceries. Now that he had decided to leave, there would be no more beatings, but no food either. If there was a welfare system in effect in southern Indiana at that time, I certainly knew nothing about it. I scrubbed the kids until they looked brand new and then put on my best homemade dress. I loaded them into the rusty old 51 Chevy and drove off to find a job. The seven of us went to every factory, store and restaurant in our small town. No luck. The kids stayed, crammed into the car and tried to be quiet while I tried to convince whomever would listen that I was willing to learn or do anything. I had to have a job. Still no luck.

"The last place we went to, just a few miles out of town, was an old Root Beer Barrel drive-in that had been converted to a truck stop. It was called the Big Wheel. An old lady named Granny owned the place and she peeked out of the window from time to time at all those kids. She needed someone on the graveyard shift, 11 at night until seven in the morning. She paid 65 cents an hour and I could start that night.

"I raced home and called the teenager down the street that baby-sat for people. I bargained with her to come and sleep on my sofa for a dollar a night. She could arrive with her pajamas on and the kids would already be asleep. This seemed like a good arrangement to her, so we made a deal.

²*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (Ps 100:4). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

³*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (Ps 105:1). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

⁴*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (1 Th 5:16-18). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

“That night when little ones and I knelt to say our prayers we all thanked God for finding Mommy a job. And so I started at the Big Wheel. When I got home in the mornings, I woke the baby-sitter up and sent her home with one dollar of my tip money - fully half of what I averaged every night.

“As the weeks went by, heating bills added another strain to my meager wage. The tires on the old Chevy had the consistency of penny balloons and began to leak. I had to fill them with air on the way to work and again every morning before I could go home.

“One bleak fall morning, I dragged myself to the car to go home and found four tires in the back seat. New tires! There was no note, no nothing, just those beautiful brand-new tires.

“Had angels taken up residence in Indiana? I wondered.

“I made a deal with the owner of the local service station. In exchange for his mounting the new tires, I would clean up his office. I remember it took me a lot longer to scrub his floor than it did for him to do the tires.

“I was now working six nights instead of five and it still wasn't enough. Christmas was coming, and I knew there would be no money for toys for the kids. I found a can of red paint and started repairing and painting some old toys. Then I hid them in the basement so there would be something for Santa to deliver on Christmas morning. Clothes were a worry too. I was sewing patches on top of patches on the boys' pants and soon they would be too far gone to repair.

“On Christmas Eve the usual customers were drinking coffee in the Big Wheel. These were the truckers, Les, Frank, and Jim, and a state trooper named Joe. A few musicians were hanging around after a gig at the Legion and were dropping nickels in the pinball machine. The regulars all just sat around and talked through the wee hours of the morning and then left to get home before the sun came up. When it was time for me to go home at seven o'clock on Christmas morning I hurried to the car. I was hoping the kids wouldn't wake up before I managed to get home and get the presents from the basement and place them under the tree. (We had cut down a small cedar tree by the side of the road down by the dump.)

It was still dark, and I couldn't see much, but there appeared to be some dark shadows in the car - or was that just a trick of the night? Something certainly looked different, but it was hard to tell what. When I reached the car, I peered warily into one of the side windows. Then my jaw dropped in amazement. My old battered Chevy was full-full to the top with boxes of all shapes and sizes. I quickly opened the driver's side door, scrambled inside and kneeled in the front facing the back seat.

“Reaching back, I pulled off the lid of the top box. Inside was a whole case of little blue jeans, sizes 2-10! I looked inside another box: It was full of shirts to go with the jeans. Then I peeked inside some of the other boxes. There were candy and nuts and bananas and bags of groceries. There was an enormous ham for baking, and canned vegetables and potatoes. There was pudding and Jell-O and cookies, pie filling and flour. There was a whole bag of laundry supplies and cleaning items. And there were five toy trucks and one beautiful little doll. As I drove back through empty streets as the sun slowly rose on the most amazing Christmas Day of my life, I was sobbing with gratitude. And I will never forget the joy on the faces of my little ones that precious morning.

“Yes, there were angels in Indiana that long-ago December.

“And they all hung out at the Big Wheel truck stop.”

In a few moments, we will sing the Doxology. Don't sing it just because everyone else is singing it. Don't sing it because that is what we do every Sunday. This week, sing as if you really mean to praise and give thanks to the 'God from whom all blessings flow.'

Soli Deo Gloria. AMEN.