

“The Tenth Leper”

Luke 17:11-19

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Mason, Michigan

October 13, 2019

Leper. The very word makes our skin crawl. Leprosy is an infectious disease, now officially called “Hansen’s disease,” caused by bacteria, that can lead to damage of the nerves, respiratory tract, skin, and eyes. This damage can ultimately result in the loss of parts of a person’s extremities, if left untreated. Leprosy is particularly prevalent among impoverished populations; most of the cases today occur in 14 of the poorer countries of the world. It is (today) a very treatable disease, with drugs; in the past 20 years, 16 million people have been cured of leprosy, and the incidence of the disease has declined from over 5 million cases in the 1980s to only about 173,000 cases today. But in the ancient world, there was no treatment. No cure. If you were afflicted with leprosy, or any kind of skin disease that resembled leprosy, you would have been banished. Cast out. The risk to your neighbors, your hometown, was just too great. You would have had to live the rest of your life away from your friends, your family, all the people you love. In some places there were colonies of lepers, groups of people afflicted with the disease, who were trying to make the best of things, together, with just each other.

But it was not a colony of lepers that Jesus encountered that fateful day. He was approaching a village, somewhere in the region between Samaria and Galilee, in the somewhat-northern part of Israel. He is about to enter the village when he encounter these lepers. They haven’t been banished ... yet.

There were ten of them. Ten men, all afflicted with the disease. This 1920 painting by Gebhard Fugel attempts to capture their desperation. Note the state of their clothing ... the bandages on their arms ... their frail-looking arms. *Feel* their plea for help. They approach him, but they don’t come *too* close. They know what happens when they come *too* close to other people. People run away.

They know who he is. “Jesus,” they call out. “Master,” they call him. They are the *only* people in the gospel who call him “master,” apart from the disciples. They are already ready – before he has done *anything* for them – to bow down to him, to fall at his feet, to lay their lives before him. This is the first time they have met him, but clearly not the first time they have *heard* about him. They know what he can do. They know he has the power to heal. Could he – *would* he – heal *them*? He truly represents their *only hope*. They will be stuck with this disease until they die – unless *he* removes it. They drop down before him, they fall to their knees ... they practically *beg*. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Mercy. Compassion. Kindness, tenderness, *love*. An act of charity, favor, goodwill. *Grace*. A

blessing from God. They are asking Jesus for a special blessing from God: the blessing of *healing*.

Note, first, their utter *trust* in him. They've got a problem, a *big* problem, and they *know* that Jesus can help them. They turn to him, bow down before him – maybe reverently, maybe desperately. When you've got a problem, when you've got a *big* problem, when something terrible is afflicting *your* life, do *you* get down on your knees, and ask Jesus for mercy? That's fairly rare in our culture today. We try to solve our problems on our own. Failing that, we ask other people for help. How often do we turn to *God* for help? How often do we get down on our knees, crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy"?

What does Jesus do? Does he heal them? No, not immediately. Sometimes we turn to Jesus, or to God, expecting instantaneous results. These ten lepers were not granted instantaneous results. Jesus *would* show them mercy, Jesus *will* heal them ... but first, he wants something from *them*.

"Go," he says. "Show yourselves to the priests." Why would he say that? What would the priests do? There were laws in the Old Testament about lepers and leprosy. Lepers were considered "unclean." "Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprosy, or has a discharge," says God in Numbers 5:2. "You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them." (Numbers 5:3) The banishment of lepers had divine sanction. But who determines whether someone is leprosy? The priests. "When a person contracts a leprosy disease, he shall be brought to the priest. The priest shall make an examination, and if there is a white swelling in the skin that has turned the hair white, and there is quick raw flesh in the swelling, it is a chronic leprosy disease in the skin of his body. The priest shall pronounce him unclean." (Leviticus 13:9-11) There's more, but you get the idea: *it was the priests* who determined whether or not someone's disease was leprosy – whether or not someone would be declared "unclean" – whether or not someone would be *permanently exiled* from their hometown.

So what does Jesus do? He tells them to *do what the law says*. Go to the priests. Have their skin examined. *Risk banishment*. They come to him for mercy, and he's sending them away, *perhaps to be exiled*. Not exactly what we would expect Jesus to do, eh?

Actually, though, *it is*. Jesus is asking them to be obedient. To be obedient to *him*. They have fallen down at his feet, they have called him "Master;" he's going to hold them to it. If he really is their master, then *they will do as he says*, regardless of the risk, regardless of the possible consequences. That is the way of things with Jesus, isn't it? He really does expect us to be *obedient* to him. He really does expect us to *follow his directions*. No matter the risk. No matter the possible *cost*.

They go. All ten of them, they go, heading into the village, to find the priests. They do the will of their master. *That* is what prompts Jesus to heal them. They are on their way to the priests, when they are healed. The disease, *gone*. The wounds, *gone*. The rags and bandages, *no longer necessary*.

If you want Jesus to respond to your pleas for help, your cries for mercy, you better be willing to *do as he bids*. Luke doesn't tell us what would have happened if they *hadn't* obeyed his will, but I think we can guess. *Their healing was entirely dependent on their faithfulness to Jesus*. If they had just gone off, ignoring Jesus' teaching, avoiding the priests, I don't think they would have been healed. Jesus is

not here to do *our* will. We are here to do *his* will. God's blessings are a *byproduct* of our faithfulness.

Nine of them continue on their way. One of them turns back, running towards Jesus, "praising God with a loud voice." He throws himself down at Jesus' feet, offering his thanks and gratitude. "And," Luke says, "he was a Samaritan." One of those hated half-breeds, the result of intermingled blood lines centuries earlier. Samaritans were not Jews, though they had traces of Jewish blood in them. They weren't pure-bred. They were second-class citizens, or worse. They were "foreigners." *Aliens*.

Jesus reflects on the situation. Ten men had prostrated themselves before him. Ten men had done his bidding. Ten men had received his healing. But only one returned to say "thank you." And the one that returned was not like the others. The rest were pure-bred; he was half-bred. The rest were Israelites; he was a foreigner. The rest were "normal." He was not. "Were not ten made clean?" asks Jesus. "The other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this *foreigner*?" Correct. Those nine Israelites did not bother to turn around to say "thank you."

There are two lessons here. First, *don't forget to say "thank you."* Whenever you have received an act of kindness, an act of mercy, say "thank you." Say "thank you" to your teachers, "thank you" to your friends, "thank you" to your church, "thank you" to your *God*. Supposedly we all learned that lesson when we were kindergarten. Too many people forget that lesson later on.

Second ... let us not judge other people because of the labels they wear. This man had two strikes against him. He was a leper, and he was a Samaritan. Jews banished lepers and hated Samaritans. This man wasn't *pure* enough, wasn't *clean* enough, wasn't *good* enough, in the eyes of the Jews. He had two major strikes against him, two strikes that made him basically *the lowest of the low*. But here in the gospel story, he is the *only* one who receives words of commendation from Jesus. He is the *only* one who both submitted himself to Jesus' will, *and* returned to offer Jesus his thanks and praise. The two labels that the man wore did not – *do not* – define who he is, at his core. He is a *good, decent man of faith and integrity*. It's easy to define people by the labels we give them, easy to overlook the *qualities* that lie hidden under the surface. We judge people by the color of their skin, by their race, their ethnicity, their native language, their country of origin. We judge people by the way they look, the way they dress, how many tattoos they are wearing, how many body parts they have pierced. Sometimes we still judge people by the diseases they contract. When the AIDS epidemic broke out a few decades ago, how many people did we ostracize, did we treat as second-class citizens, because we had *labeled* them? We are incredibly good at giving people labels – and then *using* those labels to justify the poor way we treat them. What this gospel passage is telling us is that *labels do not matter*. Not in the eyes of God. This man was a leper, and a Samaritan. Those two labels made him unpopular and unwelcome, but *those labels did not determine his inner being*. They did not describe who he was at the core. He was, in truth, a good, decent man of faith and integrity, who had – probably through no fault of his own – contracted a horrible disease. He had been ostracized and ridiculed – and was on the verge of being banished – just because he was "different." Yet he was the one – the *only* one – who both responded to Jesus in obedience and trust, *and* returned to give his praise. He was the *only* one who was both *faithful and thankful*. *Those* are the two labels that should define him. Not any other.

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