

AM Luke 17:12-19

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[0:00] So Leviticus chapter 13 from verse 1. And if the hair in the diseased area is turned white, and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a case of leprous disease.

When the priest has examined him, he shall pronounce him unclean. But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days.

And the priest shall examine him on the seventh day. And if in his eyes the disease is checked, and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up for another seven days.

And the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day. And if the diseased area has faded, and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean.

It is only an eruption. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean. But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest.

[1:36] And the priest shall look, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a leprous disease. And then at verse 45, here are the precautions that they had to take.

That can't, oh sir, there are two pages. Verse 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. 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. May God bless to us this reading. This reading is in the New Testament, in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 21.

And we'll read from verse 28. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 21. Reading from verse 28. What do you think?

[2:45] A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answered, I will not.

But afterwards, he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir, but did not go.

Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, The tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.

For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterwards change your minds and believe him.

Then hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard, and put a fence round it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.

[3:57] When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants, and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

Again he sent other servants, more than at first, and they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and have his inheritance. And they took him, and threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? They said to him, He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him the fruits in their seasons.

Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the scriptures, The stone that the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

[5:07] Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a people, producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone, will be broken to pieces, and if when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.

Just today, may God bless to us this reading too. Now we're going to look at this passage, in Luke's Gospel, chapter 17, verses 12 to 19.

And that is entitled, Jesus cleanses ten lepers. Now just before we read this, I want to give an illustration, of the way that we're going to tackle this little passage.

I imagine going up a mountain in Scotland, and as, it's only an imagination nowadays, I imagine, as I approach the top, there's the summit, as I think.

And then I climb up the last bit, and get to what I think is the summit, only to discover, that it's been masking another summit, that's just beyond it, a wee bit higher.

[6:20] So I have to go down, and up again, to this summit. And then, same thing happens. The real peak is beyond that yet. And you have to go down, and then up, and there, you're really at the summit.

And I think that's the way that I look at this story. It's got three peaks to it, three summits you might say. You go through it a bit, and you say, oh that story's about this.

Then you go a bit further, and you say, no it's about that. And then at the end you say, no it really is about this. And let's read it then, and I'll point out that as we go along. And that's the way we're going to divide up our sermon this morning.

So, here we are, starting out in our journey, through this passage at verse 12. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance, and lifted up their voices, saying, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

When he saw them, he said to them, go and show yourselves to the priests, and as they went, they were cleansed. And there you see, that's a story about healing, cleansing the leper.

[7:35] But then you go on. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks.

And you say, no, this is a story about thanksgiving. And then you read on. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, were not ten cleansed?

Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God, except this foreigner? And he said to him, rise and go your way. Your faith has made you well.

And you say, no, it's a story about Jew and Samaritan. So, we're going to go through it with these headings. This is a story, first of all, about healing. Here we have the setting.

There are ten lepers. Actually, ten male lepers, it says quite distinctly. And they stand at the distance, and they lift up their voices, saying, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

[8:44] They feel themselves to be in a miserable condition, and they're asking for mercy. Now, I always think that mercy and grace are very much alike, but grace deals more with the sinfulness of our situation, whereas mercy deals more with the misery of our situation, the sinners.

And this certainly is what is in mind here. These men are in a miserable condition, and they ask Jesus for mercy. Now, it would be worth reflecting just a wee bit on the misery of the leper situation in those days.

Leprosy, as in the New Testament, was not just leprosy as we know it now, but any similar skin disease that might be infectious or contagious.

And there were certain consequences of having such a disease as this, as we read in Leviticus chapter 13. And one of these was that they were unclean.

So, leprosy, debarred them, from worship. They were ceremonially unclean. They couldn't go to the temple. They couldn't worship God in that way. They couldn't present the sacrifices that were prescribed.

[10:03] They were debarred from access to God in the prescribed fashion. Not only that, but they had to go out and live an isolated life.

And they had to live under certain conditions. The hair grew long. The hair grew long. The hair grew long. and were disheveled in their appearance. They had to cover their upper lips and they had to call out, unclean, unclean, if anybody was near them at all.

You can imagine the social isolation, or maybe you knew it, when we had COVID. And here is an isolation much worse. Cut off completely from their families, unable to go to work at all, unable to work at home, obviously.

And here they are completely isolated. And you can imagine what it means for their families. Their wives are like widows.

Their children are like orphans. The man of the household is out there isolated because of leprosy. And you can imagine too the inner difficulties that this might bring to them.

[11:17] Surely, surely there is a measure of shame in having to dress in that way and warn people that they are unclean. Surely there is a sense of frustration that they are kept from looking after their families and going to their work.

Surely there is a sense of loss of hope. So there are spiritual problems, there are social problems, there are family and economic problems, and there are mental health problems associated with this condition.

And that is the way that they saw themselves. They are asking for mercy. They see the misery of their situation and they want Jesus to be gracious to them in the midst of that misery.

It is interesting to me that the Old Testament laws are being adhered to in this little incident. they stood at a distance.

Well, that is what lepers were meant to do. They lifted up their voices. They did not come near and address Jesus. They spoke from a distance as lepers were meant to do.

[12:26] They were adhering to the laws that were laid down. And that is interesting in its own way. On another occasion, a leper came to Jesus asking for healing and Jesus touched him.

That was breaking all the rules. But on this occasion, they do not break the rules. They observe them. And this is true too of Jesus' response to this. He observes the rules as well.

He does not invite them to come. He does not go and touch them. He answers, presumably at a distance. And he tells them to respect the law that had been given.

Go and show yourselves to the priests. That is all that he says to them. He does not say that they are going to be well. He just says, go and show yourselves to the priest.

And you see, that was Jesus taking account of their situation and respecting the law that had been given in regard to it. But it is also a means of showing us that Jesus was concerned with the all-round well-being of these men.

[13:37] It was not enough that he should cleanse their leprosy. They had got to go to the priest to get a certificate of good health so that they might be restored to their family and their community and to worship once more.

And without the priests giving that certification, they would still be treated by others as lepers. And Jesus doesn't want that. He wants to heal them through and through and cater for the whole range of their miserable condition as lepers at that time.

And that's what he does in this incident. One thing that is important is this is surely, surely a matter of faith. This is made clear at the end but it surely is a matter of faith.

Why should these people go and show themselves to the priest? Some will do it unthinkingly. Jesus has told me I'm going to do it. And that means they did it out of obedience.

But it also means they did it out of faith. Because who's going to do that if they're still lepers? It doesn't make any sense. And at the lowest they must have said in effect we're going to just trust Jesus' word.

[14:54] If there was nothing more than that they obeyed trusting that what he said made sense. Even if they didn't think how it made sense. So at that level there was faith in their obedience.

But some people surely would have thought about it. This is ridiculous. Why should I go to the priest if I'm still a leper? And some of them would surely have said this must mean that he's going to heal us.

And in that case there is a more specific faith. But the point to me is that this was an act of faith one way or another. So here is Jesus responding to this act to this request for mercy which in his own way of course is an expression of faith.

they expect Jesus to do something. They trust in him to act. And they go at his command. This is Jesus showing mercy to them in the whole range of their lives and doing so with the idea that faith is there to be acted on.

So here's us at the top of this first peak as we think the top of the hill until we see this more to it. here we are and we've got a vision we've got a picture what do we see from the top of this hill? [16:13] We see Jesus the saviour. We see him compassionate for those that are miserable. We see him interested in the whole of a person's being.

And we see him willing and able to save in response to faith. It's a very common picture. It's at the centre of the gospel.

It's not unfamiliar to us. But that's what we see from this peak. A saviour who has interested us through and through. And perhaps I could just push that a wee bit a bit more.

When we present the gospel undoubtedly we do present first of all you are a sinner in need of salvation in need of the forgiveness of sins. That is at the centre of the gospel and will always remain at the centre of the gospel.

But remember that here Jesus saw these people as ill and he healed them. He saw them as separated from their families and provided for their return to their family circle.

[17:17] He saw them cut off from worship and provided for them to go back to worship. He saw them as people with mental health problems or incipient mental health problems and he dealt with them.

He saw the wholeness of their problem and he healed them and cleansed them thoroughly. And that you see is an interesting thing to think about. We don't hear in the New Testament as far as I know that Jesus healed people of their leprosy.

We always hear that he cleansed them from their leprosy. And that you see as an indication that it wasn't a physical act of healing that he had in mind when he did that.

But it was the whole process that led to them being cleansed and pronounced pure or pronounced clean so that he could go back to the temple. So the spiritual aspect is there always.

But also there are these subsidiary situations of misery that are in Jesus' mind as he heals these ten lepers. And that's something we should bear in mind.

[18:23] Yes, we've always got to emphasize. Jesus died for sinners and gave himself and your main problem is your relationship with God. But we must also remember he takes an interest in the whole of us and he's one who heals us not just spiritually but through and through so that whatever misery and distress we're in and whether our condition be physical or mental or spiritual he's one to whom we can go and find help because he likes to show compassion to people in that position.

That's what we see the first sight that we see as we look from this part of the peak of the mountain. But there's a bit more. We go down a bit and up to another peak and we see this is a story about thanksgiving.

And so it is. So here's the second theme. Then one of them in verse 15 when he saw that he was healed turned back praising God with a loud voice and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet giving him thanks.

Now here you know there's something very genuine about this. You couldn't doubt that he was sincere. There's no doubt that he wasn't just going through the motions which appropriate that we should give thanks so we'll just go and say thank you as an act of politeness.

his whole heart and soul learned this because he speaks the word and there's actions that confirm it too. What did he do? First of all he praised God with a loud voice and he fell at Jesus' feet.

[20:01] Outward actions that indicate the spirit in which he did this. I try and imagine this. In fact you may think this is funny but strange I mean.

But what I often do in dealing with something like this trying to get the background of the people and how they would react in those days in that situation.

I sometimes ask what would a Scotsman do here? And then ask what would an African do here? Because I was an African for 11 years. And then I put the two together and say the Jewish people were probably somewhere in the middle.

Maybe more towards the African side than the Scottish side. So here's a Scot and he just discovers he's been healed. What does he do? And I reckon he walks back and he's singing to himself.

He's maybe singing Psalm 40 to himself. I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear. At length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear. He took me from a fearful pit.

[21:06] He put a new song in my mouth. I can imagine a Scottish leper in that situation reacting in that way. I can imagine an African and he strides out quickly looking up with a smile on his face and as soon as he sees somebody in the distance he waves his hand in greeting and he shouts out

what has happened.

Rather different. And I think the Jewish situation would be more to the African way of doing it than what I presume to be the Scottish way of doing it.

there was nothing to be hidden about this after all. This was their life. As soon as they saw somebody approach they were meant to shout out their condition unclean unclean.

So now that their situation has changed why shouldn't they shout out their new condition? And not only that but although they were no longer lepers although this man was no longer a leper he looked like a leper.

He had still his hair dishevelled and his old clothes on and perhaps he had taken off the thing in his upper lip but nonetheless outwardly anybody look at him and say there's a leper.

[22:26] So I think he strides out at the African and as soon as he sees somebody in the distance he shouts out in greeting and he says I'm clean I'm clean where formally he would have to say unclean unclean Jesus did it glory to God that's the way I envisage this happening a genuine experience of giving thanks to God coming from the heart from a deep awareness of the mercy of Jesus in that situation he falls down at Jesus' feet and there's a couple of things I think I want to say about that oh yeah well in general some people might say did he do right in doing this after all he was told to show himself to the priest and he didn't do so he came back to Jesus to give thanks well I think really the answer is of course he did right to give thanks it's a matter of priority ok he's going to go to the priest but that can wait first things first and the first thing for him is gratitude to God and that's the way

I think he's going to obey Jesus he's not being disobedient here he's going to do it otherwise he won't be clean but first of all the big thing is he must give thanks to God and that's an indication again of the spontaneity and the vividness of this in the way that he felt the other thing that I want to say about this is this you know this happened on another occasion something like this happened on another occasion when John had received his revelation from the angel in the book of Revelation it says I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me and what does the angel do he says I'm a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets and with those who keep the words of this book worship God so here's John falling down at the feet of an angel and the angel says oh no you can't do that you must worship

God but here is the leper falling down at Jesus feet and he doesn't say I'm a man like you don't do that he receives the worship that is due to God and he makes no complaint about that it's precise it's natural it's appropriate and there's only one explanation of that he is accepting the worship due to God because he is God God in human form but God nonetheless and this to my mind is quite an important thing to remember because many people call and question the divinity of Jesus but this is a spontaneous thing that happened and there's no sign here that Jesus is wanting to say oh don't worship me he accepts the worship of God as a worship due to God as appropriate for himself Jesus here is being recognised as God and he's accepting it well what do we have here we have here the importance of gratitude as we look from this second peak what do we see the need for gratitude the need for gratitude to have a high priority in our experience the need for gratitude that is expressed in outward ways but above all that is expressed from the heart in everything give thanks says Paul there's others as well that we could mention other passages of a similar nature that we could mention in everything give thanks in everything in the good things and in the bad things in the things that seem to be against us and the things that seem to be in favour in times of happiness and in times of sadness in everything give thanks to use a popular expression every cloud must have a silver lining for the Christian or to put it in more theological terms everything works for the good of those that love

God there may be sadness there may be suffering there may be sorrow and so on and difficulties but there's always something for which we can thank God in them and that's why Paul says in everything give thanks to God now our problem is not that we don't give thanks to God we're here worshipping him we're giving him the worship that's due to him we're doing so in our actions by standing to sing his praise by praying to him and so on and in our meals we give thanks before we eat our meals we're fairly regularly giving thanks to God the problem for us is does it come from the heart as spontaneously as it did for this man now I'm sure that 20 years later looking back on this he hasn't got the same vivid degree of gratitude as he had on this moment when he's so full of the joys of it that he can't contain it and he shouts I'm clean I'm clean Jesus did it

I'm sure after 20 years he didn't feel it so vividly but nonetheless that's what we've got to try and cultivate gratitude that isn't just expressed in an outward form of worship or in a formal act of giving thanks for our food or whatever but it's genuine coming from our hearts now that's something we've got to try and cultivate something we've got to work on to try and keep God's goodness vividly before us count your blessings name them one by one it's good if we do that because it creates a fresh a more vivid awareness of what God has done so that we can glorify God like this man did in outward form and from the heart but the story isn't finished yet there's another peak we've got to scale before we come to the end of it now he was a Samaritan then Jesus answered were not ten cleansed where are the nine was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner now there's a contrast here obviously in this at two levels there are those who didn't come back to give thanks and there's the one that did there are

[29:04] Jewish people and there's a Samaritan and these two things go together the Jewish people didn't come back to give thanks the Samaritan did and that's important to Jesus he points it out in words that we might find kind of strange as if he was a wee bit racist but that's not the way at all as we'll see as we go on and look at it but he speaks of this foreigner he does so in the most in the terms of genuine praise that this foreigner has come back now what's at issue here the Jewish people had all the privileges and all the knowledge that they could ask for and yet they don't recognise Jesus enough to give him the thanks that are due but the Samaritan who didn't have these privileges and had no background of the same degree at least he's the one that comes back and give thanks now the

Jewish people were God's people in a unique way at that stage in their history God had chosen the nation in order to be the instrument through which he was going to accomplish his purpose so these people who didn't come back they had the word of God they had a tradition of worship that came ultimately from God's word they had the promises about a Messiah who would come amongst them and do great things and one of the great things that he was going to do amongst them was this he will tend his flock like a shepherd he will gather the lambs in his arms and in another passage he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord the Messiah wasn't just a king wasn't just a mighty ruler and deliverer he was going to act like a shepherd he was going to care for his own he was going to look after them and that's the aspect of things that these men have not recognised so this background of the word of

God and the worship of God and the expectation of a Messiah and it all counts for nothing because here they don't recognise Jesus for who he is they fail to see the hand of God in this and they don't come back to worship him and that is a distinct contrast to the Samaritan the Samaritans had some sort of racial connection with the Jewish people the Samaritans were the kingdom of Israel which was the northern kingdom when the kingdom of Jews split into two Judah in the south and Israel in the north and the Assyrians came and took away the Israelites from Israel and settled them all over the empire and they brought people from all over the empire and settled them in Samaria so the people that remained of the Israelites intermingled with this vast input of other blood if you might call it that and that's the

Samaritans the Samaritans are the descendants of these people they had the word of God to the extent of having the five first books of Moses the first five books of the Old Testament that was their Bible and they had a temple of their own in Mount Gerizim but they had a very limited understanding of God's word and they were considered outsiders because they weren't pure Jews and they didn't worship God properly in Jerusalem as they ought they were despised as outcasts as other passages of the scriptures make plain but this man is one of these Samaritans there's nothing going for him and yet he recognises Jesus for who he is and he worships him as God which more than the disciples at that time did an outstanding example of the outsider that comes in of the one with no blessings apparently in his background that comes to a full experience of blessing and this is important you see because this is the way that things were and this is this is an example of many other things that Jesus spoke about in the gospels the first shall be last and the last first this is an example of it the first were the

Jewish people who had been given God's word and all the privileges of covenant blessings and the last were the outsiders the Gentiles the Samaritans but what's going to happen there's going to be a change around the first are going to be last and the last are going to be first and here the first are these nine Jewish men and they don't come back they're last in their devotion to Jesus and here's this last one this outsider this foreigner and what happens to him he is the one who recognized

Jesus the first shall be last and the last first that's illustrated here and it was a big thing for Jesus he spoke about this fairly frequently he said this many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven but the children of the kingdom will be cast out now here's a picture of that the Jewish people brought up in the faith are going to be cast out and the outsiders the Gentiles from east and west and north and south they are going to be brought in and this is an example of it the Jews are not responsive the Gentiles or the

[34:53] Samaritan in this case are and it's really an illustration too of the parable of the tenants that we read that's why we read it what happened with these tenants they were to be thrown out the vineyard was going to be given to others why because they hadn't given to the owners of the vineyard the proper fruit that was being produced what's that a picture of it's a picture of the Jewish people they'd been given the blessings of the Old Testament they'd been given blessings of the covenant they'd been given the blessings of God working through them in history and they had been disobedient and rebellious and the outcome is this the blessings are going to be taken from them and going to be given to others who are going to bear the fruits in due course and who are these others the Gentiles so there is you see in Jesus thinking this idea of the first being the last and last first and when he sees this happening here that is what he has in mind where are these nine

Jewish people they're uncaring and ungrateful but this outsider and stranger the Samaritan he's going to be brought in to the fullest blessing and this you see therefore is a picture of the future as Jesus sees it he weeps over Jerusalem because of their unbelief but he rejoices when a Greek comes seeking him because that's the picture of things that are going to be and this is an illustration of it here just as these nine Jewish people were ungrateful so the Jewish nation as a whole are going to be ungrateful and the blessings that they formerly enjoyed are going to come to the Samaritans and the Gentiles who will be responsive so this is a picture you see that enables us to see into the far distance as we stand at the peak the final peak of the story what do we see we look to a future where the gospel isn't limited to the

Jewish people or a remnant of them but where the gospel is brought throughout the world and all nations are receptive to the truth and they're flocking into the kingdom of God that's what this gives us a foretaste of a picture of that's what we see as we stand on this final peak what does it say for us well this is unique this happened once and for all and it's not going to happen again but I'm telling you something similar certainly does happen from time to time and in certain situations in our own church this sort of thing may well happen I can imagine a congregation highland congregation rural in fairly sharp decline compared to what there had been and there's many many free church people in the community who have heard the gospel but they're not the church any longer but there's people with no background at all that have come to live in the area and they're coming into the church and the local people are outnumbered and that's good and it's bad it's wonderful that people without the background of a good

Presbyterian upbringing it's good that such people are coming to know the truth and embracing it but how sad it is that people that were brought up under the truth are neglecting it to the extent that they've abandoned their faith and practice that's a similar situation not the same situation but it's a similar situation and it reminds us of the simple truth if we've got gospel blessings make sure that we use them if we've got the blessings of the word and freedom to meet together and so on let's make sure we lose them let's make sure we use them because if we don't use them we can lose them and that's what's happening to Israel here so that's the story so we've got a varied picture here we've got a picture of a saviour whom we can go to to find mercy whatever the situation of misery that confronts us is we can go to him and we can trust in him and we can lay all our confidence on him and he won't let us down because he's merciful and gracious we've got a picture of a fitting response gratitude gratitude for all the blessings we enjoy and we've got a picture of a glorious future where nations that did not know God are brought in to know him and the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of

God as the waters cover the sea and that's the three peaks of our story this morning may God bless to us his word let's sing his song