

Only one said Thank You

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read. The Gospel according to Luke chapter 17, reading at verse 11.

On the way to Jerusalem, he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance.

Two or three months back, I heard on the radio about research conducted on the skull of a woman who died a thousand years ago.

The researchers concluded that this woman had died of leprosy. They were also of the view, and I'm not sure whether this was supposition or not, that she probably contacted the illness from a red squirrel.

Apparently, Norse men used to sell red squirrels at markets in the UK over a thousand years ago.

[1 : 28] Well, I may not have the whole story, but that is what I recollect. It may arouse many questions in your mind as to the story itself.

But in this miracle healing that we read about in Luke's Gospel, we are not told how these ten people contacted leprosy, except to say that they were all leprous.

Given that the Gospel writer, Luke, was a physician, you would expect him to take an interest in people with varying kinds of illness.

Luke also had a pressing concern, and that seems to be one reason for his writing the Gospel. His concern was that an acquaintance, possibly even a friend, a man whom he calls most excellent Theophilus, would have assurance about the teaching he received.

And so at the beginning of the Gospel you find him saying, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

[3 : 04] And I think that is most interesting to reflect upon, because most of us here today have been taught about the Scriptures.

But perhaps there are some here who don't have certainty about the things that you have been taught. And just yesterday in my mail I got a letter, from an elderly man on the other side of the world, a person I met on my various occasions that I have traveled over there.

And in the course of the letter, he's 87 years and very ill, he was asking questions about things he had been taught.

Yes, he accepted the fall of man, and the fallout from the fall of man. But he was puzzled about the way of salvation.

And he's reflecting on these things now, on a bed of illness, his roots. In fact, he was born on this island. So, I am sure there are people here, like Theophilus, who have heard the teaching, but who don't have the certainty.

[4 : 33] And that's why Luke wrote his Gospel. Well, that's by the way. Three points from our text this morning. Three G's.

A group of ten lepers. A gracious act of healing. A grateful response, which brings me back to the thank you for the children.

Because nine out of ten fail to give thanks. That's a pretty harsh indictment on society, if that is repeated throughout the whole of society.

that nine out of ten fail to give thanks. Only one, tenth, give thanks. Well, let's look, first of all, a group of ten lepers.

This is not the first time that Luke mentions the disease of leprosy. You may remember that he wrote in the fifth chapter of an endless individual coming to Jesus.

[5 : 39] And these ten are also nameless, because we don't know that. Identity. And this man was also a leper. While he was in one of the cities, Luke tells us, there came a man full of leprosy, says Luke.

And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. And Luke, with a clinical eye, makes the assessment that this man was in an advanced stage of leprosy.

That's what I understand. From the fact that he says he was full of leprosy. It proved to be an encounter for that man that resulted in his marvelous healing.

Despite the fact that he was in the advanced stages of leprosy, he is marvelously healed. And it seems, in this account, it seems to me that Luke is setting before us, through this story, the very essence, or the summary, of the gospel.

It is in many ways, a sad picture that Luke paints for us of these ten individuals. For in those days, leprosy condemned you to a living death.

[7 : 01] The book of Leviticus, in chapters 13 and 14, which you can read at your leisure, provide us with details regarding leprosy, how it was to be recognized, how it was to be dealt with under the ceremonial law, including the necessity of purification rites, if anyone was ever healed.

A leper was condemned to a life of solitude, in the sense that they were cut off from their families. If a leper was married, he could not enjoy a wife's embrace.

If a leper had children, he could have no physical contact with them. No, you can imagine the stresses that would have imposed, psychological stresses, mental stresses, upon the person who suffered from this debilitating illness.

They were viewed as being dead, although still alive, and no other illness, to my knowledge, caused such disruption to family life.

In most illnesses, those who were indisposed would have their families around them. They would enjoy family support and love. And we all know how important that is when we have a sick member in our family.

[8 : 39] how the sick person enjoys family support, how it means much to them to have their family around them when they are very ill.

But for the leper, they would be banished from social interaction, they would be banished even from acts of worship. The leper was ostracized by society, and it was incumbent on the leper themselves to draw attention to the fact by crying out whenever they saw people approach, unclean, unclean.

That was to deter people from coming too close to them. And for myself personally, it's very difficult to get my head around this because your inclination when a person is ill is to try to do everything in your power to help, to give comfort, even physical contact.

And yet, they had to stay at a distance from all society. They were pariahs, not by choice, but by virtue of the illness that they had not sought or desired.

And the fact that Luke draws her attention to this grouping of ten is probably due to the fact that the pressures of isolation and the fact that they had something in common drew them together.

[10 : 26] Their outcast status under the law and in the eyes of the general population if you like the glue that held this little band together.

And Luke tells us that Jesus was on a journey towards Jerusalem on the way to Jerusalem. Luke has previously mentioned when the days drew near for him to be taken up he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

He was on a journey that is Jesus to the cross at Calvary and nothing but nothing could deflect him from that purpose. For this purpose he came into the world to save his people from their sins and that involved facing the cursed death of the cross at Calvary.

And Luke tells us he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee on the outskirts of some unnamed village he comes across this group of ten and as he entered a village he was met by ten lepers.

The identity of the village is obviously not important to the story. Just that the group were outside the village. And it seems to me that their very location is symbolic of their status.

[11 : 45] They were outside. They were outsiders. That's where they were. Now, even in our own day you find that homeless people tend to group together.

You will see them. Thankfully, not yet a feature that is marked in our own island but in other parts of the country you will see them gathering together.

Some homeless because of issues of one kind or another. And it must have been a pitiable sight to see these ten individuals with torn clothing and each one with the marked symptoms of their disease.

And that would be visible to the observer. The book of Leviticus tells us the leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes.

That was the diklat, if you like, of the ceremonial law. Let the hair of his head hang loose and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out unclean, unclean.

[12 : 50] He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling place shall be outside. The camp.

Now, the fact that grouped together did that mean that they didn't live alone? Was this a direct contravention of the teaching of the ceremonial law?

Well, I'm not sure. Luke doesn't tell us. Did they know that Christ was going to be coming in their direction? Luke doesn't tell us that either.

But we do know from Luke's Gospel that John the Baptist when he was in prison he sent personnel to Christ with a question.

And do you remember the question that John sent with these messengers? Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another?

[13 : 49] No. This, remember, coming from a man who earlier in his ministry spoke with such confident boldness, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And now he's languishing in a prison cell and he sends his followers with the question, are you really the Messiah? Or should we look for another?

Shows how frail we are as humans, doesn't it? How easily discouraged we can become, even the brightest Christian.

And remember the response that Jesus gave to the question, go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed.

The deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor of good news preach to them, and blessed is the one who is not offended to me. Lepers are cleansed. This is one of the marks of the identity as Messiah.

[14 : 56] Had these men, had they heard that message? Was that why they cried out to him in their desperate need? It may be. Luke is silent about that, but he does tell us three things about this group of ten.

One, they stood at a distance. That would be in keeping with the prohibition of the ceremonial law. Two, they raised their voices to him.

And the third piece of information is that their cry was for mercy. He was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance, lifted up their voice, saying, Jesus, master, have mercy on us.

Now, some are of the view that they began to shout before they were actually physically visible to Christ. And they base this view on the words, when he saw them.

They had been shouting. And when he saw them, implying that they were not initially visible to the eyesight of the Lord.

[16 : 07] But they stood at a distance. How great or how small, we're not told. But the fact that this is related is, I believe, very important.

And I will come back to that, and I hope it will become clearer as we go towards the end of the story. They stood at a distance. There was no invitation to come any closer.

the fact they stood at a distance seems to me to be emphasizing the isolation experienced by this group of ten.

They are on the periphery, but they were seeking mercy. Now, the opening chapter of this gospel places emphasis on the purpose of the incarnation of Christ in coming into a broken world.

It was to demonstrate mercy to broken lives. Remember how Mary sings, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

[17 : 07] Zachariah, in his song, once the power of speech is restored, speaks of that Christ has come to show the mercy promised to our fathers to give knowledge of salvation to his people and the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God.

But from then on, Luke is kind of silent about mercy. There is only one other place in his gospel between then and now where the question is asked, and who is my neighbor?

And in response to the question, Jesus told the story of a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell among robbers. Three people came along. remember the story? The first, a priest, he passed by on the other side, he wasn't interested. The second, a Levite, he did the same as the priest. And then a Samaritan, there was no expectation that the Samaritan stopped, but he did. He provided assistance on the spot and ensured that the man received adequate care, he even paid for it.

[18 : 22] And Jesus poses the question, which of these three do you think proved to be unable to the man who fell among the robbers? And the immediate response is the man who showed him mercy.

It was the correct answer. Mercy was shown to this injured man by the Samaritan. He attended to his injuries and in many ways that could be applied to the ministry of the Son of God in our nature in attending, in extending, healing to sin-broken lives.

He restores to newness of life. He gives new desires. He bestows upon those whose lives he touches, he bestows upon them a reason to hope that they will never be put to shame. well, these men are crying out for mercy, and in doing so they are seeking deliverance from the debilitating effect of leprosy that left them in such a deprived, lonely, and isolated state. They wanted health. Who doesn't when you are sick? They wanted to be free from suffering and the stigma attached to their illness because it left them isolated from the community.

[19 : 50] Well, the gospel encourages us to believe that every person who is truly desirous of mercy is not turned away, neither is your petition denied.

And when you come to the end of the story, is it not wonderful that the Christ who hears their desire for cleansing and who also sees the motive of their pleading does not deny its grave.

Why? Why is that so? Well, the answer I would give comes from the letter to the Hebrews. He had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a faithful or a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

In meeting Jesus, you meet a combination of humility and authority that you won't find anywhere else.

an astonishing union of tenderness and toughness. A group of ten lepers.

[21 : 19] That brings me to the second point, a gracious act of healing. Luke, in his earlier account, to which I referred, tells that Christ behaved very differently to the way that is recorded here.

In that narrative, we are told, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper. That is something that would have been totally unexpected, touching an unclean person.

You can imagine that such an action would have caused a sharp intake of breath on the part of onlookers. But there is no indication here that Jesus made any attempt to go closer to the group of lepers.

He merely instructed them, go and show yourselves to the priests. Well, that was not what they sought. It wasn't what they craved.

Did it increase their dejection and despondency? Well, we don't know. They would already have been to the priests. The priests would have confirmed their status as lepers, telling them that they were condemned to a living death.

[22 : 32] Why then does Jesus insist that they go again to the priest? The priest was powerless to effect healing or cleansing.

All the priest could do was reinforce the teaching of the law. He would have no words of comfort, nor could he give these ten men a ray of hope.

If they were to be healed, Christ himself would have to do this for them. So I come back to the question, if the priest is so powerless, so incapable of alleviating their condition, why does Jesus give this instruction, go and show yourselves to the priests?

Could it possibly be that Luke, that Christ was teaching how the gospel of redeeming grace operates.

The gospel shows us what we are as sinners in the light of the stringent demands of the law of God.

[23 : 48] And the law makes known to us our uttering ability to fulfill the perfect demands of the law, no matter how hard we try.

And some have tried. We cannot fulfill the perfect demands of the law of God. And even if we could, the law is unable to cleanse our conscience from the defiling power of sin.

Nor can the law diminish or lessen the charge that is laid against us as guilty sinners. And because of its very nature the law cannot lie about our sin.

The law pronounces the sentence guilty, guilty, guilty. Only Christ can heal the sin-seek soul and make the sinner pure.

And it seems to me that Christ is teaching the powerlessness or the inability of the law when he says go to the priest.

[24 : 59] Is that not what Paul teaches when he writes to the Romans? For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do. By sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemns in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit.

And so here Luke tells us as they went they were cleansed. If there was disappointment that healing was not immediate Luke does not specify but he implies that they followed the instruction to go to the priest.

That tells you something of the authority with which the words were spoken. Did they go with renewed hope and expectation?

Had they traveled far before healing occurred? We're not told. All we're told is as they went they were cleansed.

Luke doesn't tell us even if the healing happened simultaneously or who was the first to notice that healing had come? We know that together they had shouted Jesus master of mercy on us.

[26 : 28] And what we do know is that they were all cleansed. And as one commentator puts it very perceptively they received help in the path of obedience.

Their petition had been answered. And what a moment it must have been for these wretched men in their helpless condition. And yet there is no word mentioned of their ecstatic joy.

Yet it must have been a very special moment for those who had been condemned by their illness now to be released from their dark prison cell of despair on account of leprosy.

They were in a place of no hope. And now they have renewed health. And so although they all had experience of being rid of leprosy, Luke tells of one whose experience is different from the rest.

A gracious act of healing, freely bestowed by Christ. A group of ten lepers brings me to my third and final point, a grateful response.

[27 : 51] They all returned to give thanks to the Lord Jesus for his amazing and gracious response to their petition. You might have thought that that would have been true, but sadly it is not.

What Luke tells us is this, then one of them when he saw that he was healed turned back. And it seems to me that this is where the greatest emphasis lies in this story.

Not so much about a wonderful act of healing, amazing and impressive as that act of healing is, but on the reaction of these men to the act of mercy that they experienced.

One of the themes of these verses is that gratitude to God is the indispensable evidence of grace received. You know, the whole structure of true religion can be subsumed under three headings, three G's again, guilt, grace, ungratitude.

And here we have, I would suggest, a microcosm of humanity. Is sin, any sin, more characteristic of the fallen children of Adam than ingratitude?

[29 : 31] As I stated at the outset of this story, Luke tells us that this happened as Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem.

What was going to happen there? Was it not what is so admirably expressed in the prophecy of Isaiah when he speaks of the suffering servant of Jehovah, pierced for our transgression, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds we are healed.

Christ descended from the heights of glory into the mire and filth of a sin-sick world.

And he was now on the journey towards the culmination of his purpose and coming into the world.

He was on the journey towards the cross, facing the scorn and the derision of man, the acute loneliness associated with being the sin-bearer which is symbolized by the scapegoat in the Old Testament being led out into the wilderness.

And could we not say that there is a particular sense in which he becomes the true leper, rejected by man, yes, and even rejected by heaven as he bears the curse of those for whom he came to die.

[31 : 15] Remember this rejection led to the cry of dereliction, my God, my God, why? Do we appreciate what he did?

Luke implies that the nine were so caught up with the physical act of healing that they lost sight of the bestower of health.

They did not make the return journey to give thanks to Christ. They received what they craved, physical healing, but too busy to give thanks.

you know, you can go to a lost eternity and be physically healed. You can go to a lost eternity in perfect physical health.

The nine could testify that they met with Jesus and he heals us. That can happen too at a physical level and still go to a lost eternity.

[32 : 31] You know, there are many who are on a sick bed or in some other period of intense trial, period of crisis who have made promises to God.

If you will but deliver me out of this situation, out of this crisis, I will serve. the Lord. Maybe you are here today and that is exactly true of a time in your life.

If you will just get me out of this crisis, however you do it, and you made a promise, and yet when deliverance came and the crisis moment passed, passed, no more word of the promise that you made to Almighty God.

Is that you today? Because the nine would appear to be in that grouping. I read not so long ago of a preacher who gave suitable names to each of these nine ungrateful lepers.

On the first one he called callous, the second he called thoughtless, the third he called proud, the fourth he called envious, the fifth cowardly, the sixth calculating, the seventh worldly, the eighth gregarious, and the ninth procrastinating.

[34 : 24] All these are reasons for the power of an ungrateful spirit before God. Is that you today, friend?

Are you here today as one who sits guilty as charged? Yes, he took me out of a crisis moment, and yes, I promised if he would, I would serve, and yes, I have not fulfilled that promise.

Is that you? Because you see, the man who returned could say, and not many people could say this, I am so glad I had leprosy.

It was the means that God used to bring me to the feet of Christ. Not many people could say that. Everybody stood back from this debilitating illness.

Then one of them, Luke says, when he saw that he was healed, turned back praising God with a loud voice, he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. And Luke gives us this almost footnote.

[35 : 43] Did you notice it when you were reading it? Now he was a Samaritan. Now he was a Samaritan. There's no mention of a Samaritan before.

No. but as if Luke is saying to us, this was the most outcast among the outcasts.

Oh, my friend, is that how you feel today? Do you feel an outcast? Not at home amongst the people of God, not at home in the world.

Well, someone once wrote like this, Oh, how the grace of God amazes me. It lost me from my bonds and set me free.

What made it happen so? His own will, this much I know, set me as now I show at liberty.

[36 : 51] And here is Christ posing the question, we're not ten cleansed, where are the nine? We hear no more of them. What happened to them? Luke doesn't say. But the implication is that they regarded themselves as fully deserving of the mercy and the gift they received.

And they saw therefore no reason to give thanks to the gracious and generous benefactor who had so freely healed them. Oh, it's not easy for proud, fallen man to accept and acknowledge that we are indebted to the Most High.

Is it? And you see, that is constantly taught in the Word of God.

Paul, writing to Timothy, understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.

People will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, ungrateful, unholy.

We are all prone to this ungrateful spirit, forgetful of giving thanks. And that brings me to the Sunday school address today.

[38 : 18] bless the Lord, O my soul, says the psalmist, don't forget not all his benefits. So often we are complaining rather than counting our blessings.

And this man, as soon as he was aware of restoration to health, he comes to Jesus to give thanks. He did this willingly of his own volition and joyfully. And so we find him.

One who in many ways was more far off than the rest because he was a Samaritan. He is brought near.

And is that not just what the Apostle Paul states in summarizing the lives of those who have been brought to faith.

He says you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. In other words, you were far off.

[39 : 31] He goes down, he goes on in that very chapter to tell how you were far off. Now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Outcasts brought near. And here was this Samaritan. Was he the one Samaritan amongst the ten? The group of ten? We don't know. But what we do know is that the Jewish people enjoy tremendous privileges. And in many ways that is true of us too who were brought up under the gospel.

So Luke reminds us who returned to give thanks? A Samaritan. And you see, there was a distance between him and Jesus at the beginning of the story.

The end of the story. There is no distance between him and Jesus. He's at the feet of Jesus. That's what the blessing of salvation does.

[40 : 51] This is where it brings the rebellious sinner who was once a stranger to grace and to God. Brings you to the feet of Jesus, a place that was highly valued and extremely precious to Mary of Bethany.

A place of learning, a place of communion, a place of fellowship. His leprosy the means of bringing him to a place of blessing and security.

Oh, has your shame and mine and our helplessness, our sin, our inability, our desire for grace and mercy has brought us to the feet of Jesus.

This man gives himself wholly to Christ. He's not coming now for what he can get, but he is coming because of Christ himself.

Christ himself. not coming what he can get, not coming as it were, somehow, that by coming he would please God, but he is coming for the sake of Christ.

[42 : 14] No distance between this man and Christ, he was at his feet. And this is the question for you and me, and I'm closing with this, and perhaps you know the question before I ask it, is there a distance between you and Christ today?

Are you taken up with the benefits that you are losing sight of the plenteous giver? Is that why you have not come to his feet?

Desire is to be near in time and in eternity. I repeat, is there a distance between you and Christ Jesus the Lord today?

George Herbert, the poet, some of you may have heard of him, thou that has given so much to me. Give one thing more, a grateful heart, not thankful when it pleases me, as if thy blessings had spare days, but such a heart whose pulse may be thy praise.

Oh, is that the kind of heart that you and I have today? a group of ten lepers, a gracious act of healing, a grateful response.

[43 : 32] Do we know something of it? Let us pray.