

## Lord, We Come to Thank You

Luke 17:11-19 (NIV)

<sup>11</sup> Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup> As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance <sup>13</sup> and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" <sup>14</sup> When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. <sup>15</sup> One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. <sup>16</sup> He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" <sup>18</sup> Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" <sup>19</sup> Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

As we pick up in this account of Jesus' life from Luke's Gospel account, he is on his way to Jerusalem for the final time. Upon entering a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (verses 12-13)

Leprosy is this bad, contagious, slow-growing skin disease caused by bacteria. It can affect nerves, skins, eyes, causing you to lose the ability to sense touch or pain. It can result in blindness or the paralysis of hands and feet, even reabsorbing digits making it look like you a finger or a toe fell off.

Although you can treat leprosy with antibiotics today, they didn't have those in Jesus' day. And since they weren't sure how it spread, people with leprosy were separated from the rest of society and they formed what was aptly named "leper colonies." People infected with leprosy were ostracized. They couldn't join the assembly of worshipers at church. Some laws stated that they couldn't come within 150 feet of people if the wind was blowing. They had to maintain at least 6 feet of distance from family.

Having just come out of the COVID-19 pandemic, I think we can appreciate the negative effects of social distancing. You now know the firsthand experience of thinking that being near your loved ones you might get them or you sick with something that would cause terrible suffering, maybe even death. Maybe you spent a Thanksgiving with a Zoom call instead of being able to hug your loved one and tell them that it would all be okay. Maybe you had to settle for interacting with them through a window at a nursing home. We all had a time when we couldn't come and gather as God's people in this building. We have felt that pain of separation and isolation.

The only way that a leper would get to rejoin their family and friends was if the infection went away and a priest declared them clean. How much more then do we understand this cry from the 10 lepers. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (verses 12-13)

Already we can appreciate the faith of these 10 men. They had no other means to combat this disease, other than to hope and pray. But they must have heard about Jesus, heard about what he had done for others, who people said he was. That's why they call out to him. They believe that he can do something about this. They don't believe that they should receive anything from him, but they ask for mercy. They ask to be treated better than they deserved to be treated so that they can rejoin the people they love.

Jesus' response is interesting. When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." (verse 14a) There was no fancy hand-waving. There was no incantation. There were no drugs administered. He simply told them to go and do the thing they would do if the infection had gone away. Go, and confirm that you are cleansed.

"And as they went, they were cleansed." (verse 14b) We're not left to wonder if Jesus actually did for them what he had promised to do. They were cleansed. The lepers took Jesus at his Word, and they were healed. Can you imagine the thoughts running through their heads? Did they immediately notice their skin changed back to healthy colors? Did marvel at their hands with the feeling all returning? Were they focused intently on finding the priest who would declare them clean? Were they thinking about which family member they would find first and wrap their arms around? Were they thinking of being home again for the holy days?

No doubt there was gratitude that was welling up and looking for an outlet from all 10 men. But we only hear of what one of them did with that gratitude. "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan." (verses 15-16) This man didn't care that Jews and Samaritans didn't get along, that they had a cultural prejudice that taught generation after generation to revile each other. This man wanted to thank

Jesus. He knew that Jesus did have mercy on him. He knew that he would be able to get home to his family and wrap them in his arms again. His gratitude led him to come and thank the Lord.

Then we hear Jesus' assessment of his miracle and the ensuing direction of gratitude. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" (verses 17-18)

This is the part where we are tempted to be self-righteous, to shake our heads in disgust that the other nine men did not come to thank Jesus. They just went on their way. We, though, Lord, have come to thank you here at church on the night before Thanksgiving. We have come to an extra church service. We are going above and beyond the normal Christian expectations. This is how thankful we are! We are the one Samaritan. We are the good one. All the rest of the people not here tonight, man, they are so ungratefully sinful. I'm glad I'm here and not like those other nine.

Are we really all that different from the other nine? When God answers our prayers, gratitude is natural. But what do we do with it? What do we do when we receive positive answers to prayers, when we've gotten better from a sickness, when we've made it out of surgery, when the negative result comes back on the COVID test, when we arrive safely to grandma's house for Thanksgiving, when we make it safely home? Has there been a time in our lives when our prayers have been answered and thanking God wasn't the first thing we did? Maybe we just breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe we called a loved one to tell them the good news. Maybe we jumped, skipped, and hopped to go and do the things that we couldn't do before because now our prayer to God was answered. We have taken God at his Word like the other 9 men did, but our gratitude was sidetracked, and we forgot to come and thank the Lord. We cannot say that we are better than the 9.

But that's exactly why it is good that we have come here tonight to thank the Lord. On the night before Thanksgiving, we get to take stock of all the good things we have in life and are here to purposefully remember that they all come from God. Maybe the first thing we should thank God for tonight is the fact that Jesus came and paid the price for our ingratitude and was also perfectly grateful to God for everything.

That's an amazing thought, isn't it? Jesus never missed thanking God for anything in any situation. More than one thank you prayer of Jesus to God is recorded in the Bible. Since we know Jesus was perfect, we know that he never skipped a prayer of thanksgiving before a meal. Whenever it was good and proper to do so, he must have thanked his parents. He always perfectly thanked God and other people to do what we have not always done. He came and thanked the Lord for us so that we would have credited to us a life of perfect gratitude. It's as if God says to us as he did to that Samaritan: "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (verse 19) We take God at his Word that he lived a perfect life of gratitude for us.

Maybe something that we all need to realize on Thanksgiving from this account of the 10 healed lepers is that we need to be taught what to do with gratitude. Many of us were taught to write or say "thank you" when someone gives you a gift, whether it was the thing you were wishing for so much or not. We had to be shown where to direct our gratitude.

Reflecting on all the things that God has done for you, what can help you direct your gratitude to God? Will it be something that you do yourself? Will it be a journal of thankfulness, a note on your smartphone, that each time you think of something God has done for you that you would record it with the words, "Thank you God for..."? Will it be a family bedtime "Thank you, God" prayer, where everyone says one thing that they are thankful for? Can you add to that a challenge, that everyone would add one new thing to thank God for every night? (Maybe a place where the journal of thankfulness may come in handy...)

Maybe what you and I need to help us to remember to direct our gratitude to God is community. Thankfully, we are not the lepers. We get to gather with people. Who can we get together with in order to thank the Lord? Who can you gather around who will help you direct your gratitude to God? Who can you gather around who needs your help to direct their gratitude to God? Go, and find them. Help direct our gratitude to the God who gives us all good things.

Lord, forgive us for our moments when we have not directed our gratitude to you for all the good things you do for us. Thank you for covering us with your life lived of perfect gratitude. Help us to direct our gratitude to you in all things and help others to direct all their gratitude to you as well. Lord, we come to thank you. Amen.