

Food for Thought—Lessons from the 10 Lepers



a healthy (non-leprous) hand; photo by Syd Wachs on unsplash

We can glean a lot from the story of Jesus and the 10 lepers.

In this encounter, recorded in Luke 17, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the last time, and He knows what is waiting for him there. On this journey he continues to talk, teach, and heal. It's a subtle reminder that no matter what segment of life we are walking in or how close to death we are, we can still be used by God to minister to others. We are still on duty in every phase of our lives.

He is passing through Galilee and Samaria (something many Jews farther south would never do—considering the region unclean, they would travel around it, making their journey far longer in order to avoid it). But Jesus passes through it. As he enters a village, a group of 10 lepers call out to him. This is a racially and culturally mixed group. Most of the lepers are Jewish, but at least one of them is a Samaritan. Under normal circumstances the Jews and Samaritans would not mix. Bitter, long-seated, mutual suspicion and ill will existed between the two groups. But leprosy is a great leveler. The old distinctions are gone. A leper is unclean; there's no point in a Jewish leper keeping his distance from a Samaritan leper. The dire consequences of this disease have made them brothers in an outcast and solitary group.

Being together in a dire situation does bring people from different walks of life together to a degree which is rarely seen in normal life. This is one of the few good things about dire situations. We humans, whether we know it or not, seem to sense this and are drawn to it. We write and read books (and make and watch films) about this dynamic. We watch a dire situation like a plane crash or a battle or an earthquake bring together rich and poor, educated and uneducated, working together to try to survive and looking out for one another. These books and movies usually contain at least one character who does something selfish and despicable. But they also inevitably have characters who had little in common before the catastrophe struck (or had downright relationship friction before) but are now powerfully linked by their plunge into danger and high stakes and become brothers and sisters through this shared experience. Something dire--like leprosy--brings the old barriers crashing down. A friend of mine once commented that if we lived in a country where Christians were persecuted, all our bickering about doctrine and so forth would immediately cease. We would be thankful to be able to spend even a minute in the company of another Christ follower of any stripe. We would have Jesus in common, and that would matter far more than anything else.

OK, back to the 10 lepers....Leprosy has made all the former distinctions between Samaritan and Jew—which once seemed so important—to fall away.

It's also worth noting that—in the old orthodoxy of their time and place—leprosy would've been assumed by almost everyone to be a result of the lepers having been especially sinful. Even the lepers themselves have probably wondered many times what they'd done to deserve this, adding this mental anguish to their suffering. (Jesus makes it clear in the gospels that this assumption regarding suffering and sin is not correct.)

The action begins with Jesus steering his journey through this village, but the next step is taken by the lepers. Instead of staying away in a cave, too filled with hopelessness or self-loathing to even bother to catch sight of the famed rabbi, the lepers take action in hope. They call out to Jesus, and when they do, their words are a perfect prayer. They simply say, "Master, have mercy on us!" These simple words include implicit humility, the expression of need, and the hope that they have found the one who can help them.

Jesus is going to heal these men, and it's worth noticing how he does it—or perhaps I should say how he does not do it. As Michael Card notes, there is no stage-magician fanfare, no colored smoke, no magic words, no shouting, no

waving of arms. The healing will be simple, it will occur off-stage really, and it will not be for show—it will be for the afflicted men.

Jesus tells the lepers to go show themselves to the priest. The books of Moses had instructed that if people with a skin disease were healed, they were to go show themselves to the priest so that he could verify that, yes, they were well now and could safely re-enter the community. We are told that it is as they are obeying Jesus, as they are turning and running toward the priest, that the lepers are healed. The miracle happens as they *obey*. Often obedience itself both requires faith and increases faith. Obedience is important and powerful.

And there is more. One of the (former) lepers (now healed) runs back to Jesus, falling at his feet and thanking him with a loud voice. Again, as so often happens in the ministry of Jesus and in God's kingdom, it is the one person who perhaps seemed least likely to remember to thank Jesus (a Samaritan) who does remember to thank him and does so with his whole heart.

It's also important to note what Jesus doesn't do at this point—he doesn't un-heal the other 9 lepers for not coming back to thank him! It's a good reminder that the Lord is not constantly looking for small faults or petty, tiny reasons to curse us. He wanted all 10 of those men to be healed and is still pleased that they all are healed and probably still pleased and refreshed by their humility and obedience-in-faith.

But the thankful Samaritan who comes back to thank Jesus will find an additional blessing. After he falls down at the Lord's feet exuberantly thanking him, Jesus tells him that his faith has made him "whole." The Greek word translated "whole" here, *sōzō*, does not mean just physically whole, but also spiritually healed and whole. It is the same word that is often translated in the New Testament as "saved"—as in John 3:17 ("For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved") or Acts 2:21 ("whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved"). This Samaritan leper first received the gift of physical healing, and then his gratitude, it seems, has opened the door for more blessing—spiritual wholeness, salvation. Thankfulness opens the heart.

The lack of thankfulness does the opposite. If it is present often enough or long enough, an absence of thankfulness tends to harden the heart. And a hard heart has a more difficult time receiving good things from God. It is like hard, packed soil which a seed would bounce off of rather than sink into.

Being thankful turns things around and puts us in the right direction. God is not, by the way, I think, asking us to be thankful *for* each and every thing (we are not asked to be thankful for Hitler or Satan) but for us to find things to be thankful for *in* every situation.

It's difficult to overrate the value of thankfulness. I often find that even a little of it can completely turn around my feelings and launch me into better directions in thoughts and actions. And I have found it helpful—when I know I need an attitude tune-up—to remember very simple things. I'm thankful for trees. I'm thankful that I have modern plumbing. I'm thankful I'm not in a concentration camp. I am thankful that if I ever am in one, I won't be alone—He'll be with me.

You may have heard this story already, but in case you haven't, Matthew Henry was once robbed, and his first reactions were very human—he felt upset, angry, vulnerable, etc.—just as I would and most anyone would. But then he stopped and thought about what he could be thankful for even after being mugged. He thought of these things: he was thankful because he'd never been robbed before; he was thankful that while his assailant had taken his wallet, he hadn't taken his *life*; he was thankful that even though the mugger had taken all he had on him, he hadn't had a great deal of money on him; last, he was thankful that he hadn't been the one doing the robbing (that would've been worse because it would've harmed his soul). Thankfulness can open our eyes, bring us out of a pit, remind us of priorities, change our direction, and make our hearts more like good receptive soil.

Hope and faith through obedience brought all the lepers physical healing, and the thankfulness of the Samaritan leper brought him spiritual wholeness on top of that. I hope all of the other 9 found spiritual healing at some point too, but we can tell that the one who came back in gratitude found it right away.

--Sally