

## **THE GRATEFUL SAMARITAN**

**Luke 17:11-19**

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Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into 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!”

When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

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.

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well” (Luke 17:11-19, TNIV).

Unlike many of the healing stories in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the healing of the ten lepers in Luke’s Gospel lacks any sign of physical contact between the hands of Jesus and those who suffer. The healing that occurs comes by means of a desperate appeal, a simple pronouncement, and responsive faith. But the ten lepers keep their distance, and so does Jesus. At first glance, this absence of touch by Jesus may seem insignificant, but it is not. Luke carefully crafts this story to highlight a number of gaps or separations created by boundaries. Jesus erases these boundary lines by merely speaking of God’s purposes.

The story of the ten lepers is full of boundary lines drawn this way and that. Jerusalem would soon be known as the place where people would draw a line in the sand between those they considered acceptable and those they did not. Jesus moves closer to Jerusalem in this episode, nearer to the verdict of being found unacceptable Himself. On the way to Jerusalem He passes along between Samaria and Galilee.<sup>1</sup> Samaria is the symbolic place of rejection; it is that community of foreigners who would not receive Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Galilee is the home of the Israelites, the starting point for Jesus’ public life. Now

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<sup>1</sup>I realize that Luke’s sense of Palestinian geography is a bit contorted in this account, but that is another subject for another lesson.

<sup>2</sup>See Luke 9:51-56.

Jesus walks the boundary between these dissimilar lands, as He seeks to close the rift between these different peoples.

Jesus encounters, from a distance, a group of lepers “as He entered” a village. Luke doesn’t tell us the name of the village, perhaps because what he wants us to see does not lie within the village. The dwelling place of the lepers *outside* the city limits is what catches our attention. Outside of the village, outside of the circle of acceptable life, outside in the land of rejection and repulsion is where these ten lepers lived. Ritual laws of impurity relegated them to such a place,<sup>3</sup> somewhere near where the town dump must have been situated. The easiest way to put people out of mind is to place them out of sight. These ten lepers had been marginalized and ostracized by society. They suffered as much from a social disease as from a physical disease. Their only home was apart from other people. Lepers lived in the land of isolation.

These particular lepers were much like those found outside the gates or walls of any other city. They could raise their voices and cry out. Levitical laws required that they announce their uncleanness to the world. One of the ways the world keeps the outcasts in their place is to force them to constantly confess their condition. For lepers this was done when they lifted their voices to tell those who passed by, “Unclean, unclean.”<sup>4</sup> But on this day, the cry of these ten was more than an announcement. It was a plea for mercy: “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

Where did these lepers learn the term “master,” a term ordinarily used only by the disciples? This we may never know. What is clear is their eagerness to receive something Jesus possessed but they did not. Perhaps He held the clue or cure that could end their crippling social stigma. Luke indicates that even though they stood at a distance from Jesus, honoring a proper boundary, Jesus nevertheless “was met” by them as He entered the village. We anticipate that boundaries are about to be broken.

The instruction from Jesus that the lepers go and show themselves to the priests is what we might expect. Jesus knew Jewish law, and He knew the role of priests. When it came to leprosy, priests served as the purity inspectors. Their assignment wasn’t all that different from modern-day customs officials who inspect people and their baggage for

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<sup>3</sup>Lev 13:46.

<sup>4</sup>Lev 13:45.

entrance into a different world. The priests were the border officials, enforcing the boundary between the land of the clean and the land of the unclean. Priests alone had the authority to determine who was pure and who was not. They could alter the life of a person with a simple and swift decision.

But to our surprise, it did not matter if this group of lepers ever reached the holy checkpoint where priestly decisions were made. They were cleansed “as they went,” Luke tells us. As they walked they were changed. Somewhere between their encounter with Jesus and some unnamed temple, they were cleansed. And this cleansing was a gift—a gift that had come from outside themselves. The boundary of uncleanness that had restricted their lives for so long was finally gone.

Were it not for the camera zooming in on one of the ten, we would never learn of yet other boundaries broken by the ministry of Jesus. Nine of ten cleansed lepers, presumably Jewish, may have made it to the temple. It seems likely, but we don’t know. But this tenth cleansed leper likely never made it to the temple. He was a Samaritan, and so he lived with the double affliction of a dreadful disease and the wrong ethnic background.

This Samaritan foreigner, this Samaritan outcast responds to being cleansed in a dramatic way. Seeing that he has been healed, this outsider retraces his steps back to Jesus and spontaneously launches a three-part response. The first part is expected. Nothing is unusual about praising God for the miracle of healing. However, it is the second and third parts of the grateful Samaritan’s response that we may not expect. Falling at the feet of Jesus—Jesus, a Jew—this foreigner closes the gap that customarily separated Samaritans and Jews from one another. And in an act of reverent submission, the Samaritan gives thanks to Jesus for the healing he has received. The Samaritan has found the temple of praise, and it most certainly is not a place—it is a person! In an instant, gone is the distance of disease; gone is the social isolation; gone is the racial segregation; gone is the religious division! This foreigner has found the true temple of God, and that temple is *not* a building confined to a specific geographic location and restricted to a particular people. This true temple of God is open to all who will enter it with faith and thanksgiving.

How often the outsider behaves more receptively than the insider! The Samaritan

“saw that he was healed”—he noticed his gift of new life, and he connected it with the Giver of that life. He is aware of his blessing, an awareness presumably missed by the other nine cleansed lepers. And with this recognition of blessing comes the intense desire to give thanks.

Jesus’ comments on the other nine lepers have an indicting ring to them—or so it seems at first. Strangely enough, these lepers were only doing as they were told. They were traveling to visit the priests. Obedience guided their footsteps. A closer look at what Jesus said indicates that He may not have intended to speak words of reproach. He does not imply that obedient faith is lacking in these nine lepers. He simply suggests that faith is incomplete without some acknowledgement shown to the Giver of life. “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Jesus often used questions such as these to cause us to examine more carefully and more honestly our own faith. Nine lepers have no problem recognizing that something in their lives has changed for the better. What they miss is the acknowledgement that this gift of healing has come from someone in particular.

Like the nine Jewish lepers, I am an insider. Like them, by virtue of birth I have never known what it is to be an outsider. And like them, I have often focused on the blessings and have forgotten the source of these blessings. And so, during this season of Thanksgiving, I have a special prayer: *I am asking God to make me more like the Samaritan.* I am asking that I may see that I have been cleansed of the leprosy of my soul; that I may feel the fellowship of my spiritual family; and that I may know the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ. Sin—it is an affliction far more deadly than leprosy. I pray that I will never take God’s forgiveness for granted. Community—it is hard to face this world alone, and that is why I need the church. I pray that I will not take my brothers and sisters in Christ for granted. Joy—it is found at the feet of Jesus. I pray for a sense of thankfulness that brings me again and again to the feet of Jesus, and I pray for a spirit of courage that breaks any boundary that hinders any one from falling at the feet of Jesus with me. I pray that God will make me more like the Samaritan leper.

During any period of time and at any particular place, it is the responsibility of the church to return thanks to the One who mercifully gifts us with new life over and over

again. Giving credit where credit is due always deserves a deliberate act of thanksgiving from the faithful. But gratitude will always be in short supply whenever we become more interested in blessing than in the source of that blessing. Gratitude will always be in short supply whenever we become more interested in the gift than in the Giver. Sometimes it takes a stranger from beyond our most familiar and comfortable boundaries to open our eyes to the richness and goodness of life. On this day, we have a grateful Samaritan who reminds us that who we are is God's gift to us, and that what we do with our life becomes our gift to God.

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