

Thanksgiving Eve, November 22, 2023

LUKE 17:11–19. (EHV)

On another occasion, as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he was passing along the border between Samaria and Galilee. When he entered a certain village, ten men with leprosy met him. Standing at a distance, they called out loudly, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they went away they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, thanking him. And he was a Samaritan. Jesus responded, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go your way. Your faith has saved you.”

There once were ten men who had a serious, debilitating skin disease—one Samaritan and nine Jews. When they first suspected they had the disease, they had each gone and showed themselves to the priests at the temple, and the priests had pronounced each of them leprous and ceremonially unclean. Suddenly their lives were turned upside down. By divine law, they had to exchange their good clothes for torn ones. They had to stop grooming their hair, cover the lower part of their face (think some early version of COVID masks), and any time anyone came near them, they had to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” They had to avoid those who were ceremonially clean at all costs, so that others would not become like them. They either had to live alone on the outskirts of the towns and villages or, in their case, they had chosen to live with other unclean people who had the same miserable disease and shared the same miserable existence.

One day, these ten men heard through the grapevine that Jesus was coming their way. They had heard that Jesus did wonderful things: The blind received sight, the lame walked, the deaf gained their hearing, and *those who had leprosy were cured*. Even the dead were raised, and the good news was preached to the poor.

Every so often TV commercials and internet ads announce the coming of some miracle-like solution to loss of sight or hearing, excessive ear wax, or some other problem. And the vast majority of us are probably annoyed by those ads and dismiss them as yet another gimmick by the fortunate to make money at the expense of the less fortunate. But imagine if you weighed 500 pounds and could hardly move or do anything you wanted, and then you saw an ad for some alleged miracle drug for weight loss. You might not mute the TV or hit the skip button.

Perhaps for an ordinary person who had never met Jesus, the reports about him would have sounded too good to be true. But for these desperate, miserable, disease-infected lepers those reports inspired hope. In addition, the nine Jews may have been familiar with the Old Testament promises about the Messiah who would take up their infirmities, carry their sorrows, and take away their sins. Could *this* be the Messiah? Could *this* be the Son of God, as many were saying? They were determined to find Jesus when he came through.

And they did. Jesus arrived on the outskirts of the little village in their vicinity one day. They positioned themselves between Jesus and the village itself, maintaining their distance from both, and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” They had nothing to offer Jesus. They knew they could only ask for his pity, for his mercy.

And Jesus had mercy in abundance. “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” The only reason they would have for showing themselves to the priests was if they had strong suspicion and hard evidence that their disease had been cured. So implicit in this command was a promise.

And they had to receive the promise by faith. Jesus did not say, “Come here and I will touch you and heal you, and then you can show yourselves to the priests.” They also had to trust that he was not some sort of a prankster who would tell them to show themselves to the priests just to get them out of his way, and that they would present themselves to the priests only to have them say, “You’re still as leprous as ever! What kind of sick people are you? Get out of here!” They had to receive his promise by faith.

And they did. They went. They believed in Jesus. And “as they went away, they were cleansed.”

But immediately after being cleansed, something happened to the nine Jews. They were certainly happy, but they simply went off the share the good news with family and friends and to rejoin normal life in society again.

But the foreigner, the Samaritan... He had probably been unfamiliar with the true teaching about the Messiah. He probably had formerly been led astray by the hodge-podge, superstitious religion of Samaria. But now he had come face to face with the author of true religion, the Son of God. He, like the others, had been cleansed by him from his leprosy, and if from his leprosy, then certainly also from his sin!

He could not contain his joy. “He turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, thanking him. And he was a Samaritan.”

Now listen to Jesus’s response: “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?” To whom is Jesus addressing this question? He is not addressing it to the Samaritan, since he does not say, “Was no one found to return and give glory to God except you?” He is not addressing his Father in heaven, since he does not say, “Was no one found to return and give glory to you except this foreigner?”

He is asking us, friends. Where are the other nine? Is it really true that no one came back to glorify and thank Jesus except this one foreigner? Jesus wants us to reflect on this event and consider its implications for ourselves.

Why did the other nine not come back? Why did they forget to return thanks?

Was it because they were only looking forward and not looking back? We can imagine them thinking, “Finally, we can do what we want again! We can see family and friends again! We can take a hot bath and comb our hair and present ourselves properly in public again!” Maybe they were only looking to the future and forgetting the past.

That’s a very American trait we can relate to, isn’t it? We’re often so rushed, occupied, and busy looking forward that we fail to take time to look back and reflect. I very well may be making a bigger deal out of this than I should, but I think this is illustrated well by the common custom of both asking God’s blessing *and* returning thanks to him *before* the meal. Now one could argue that at least we’re remembering to thank him, and I suppose that’s true. But would that practice work with anyone else? What if you always thanked your spouse for making you a meal before digging in but never thanked him or her after you tasted it or once the meal was over? What if you thanked your tour guide as you began your tour but didn’t say a word

afterwards? But when it comes to meals we're in a rush to eat and get on with our life and don't seem to want to take time after the meal to look back and thank God.

Have we stopped to reflect on this past year? What are the special blessings of this year that you didn't enjoy during other years? A new child or grandchild? A new job or other new stage in your life entered upon? A unique challenge that was overcome? I just heard that in places in this region of the state, some farmers had record crops. Have we stopped to think about all the bad things that could have happened, but didn't? There were no tornadoes in Winner this year. Is your car still running? Your house still standing? Do you have family members who are still alive, whose company you are still able to enjoy?

And let's not limit ourselves to just this past year. This is why the study of history is important; it puts things into perspective. Pastor Strieter, the Lutheran pastor from the 1800s whose stories I like to share, talks about how at his first call, he lived with his members on rotation every quarter year, and at one of the homes he lived in he regularly had only boiled potatoes to eat, sometimes accompanied by boiled cow's udder. And that means the family he was living with wasn't very well off either. Have you or I *ever* had to live like that? Let's not be in such a rush all the time. Let's regularly take time to stop, look back, reflect, and return thanks.

Did the nine men forget to return thanks because they thought they were entitled to good health and the good life? This is becoming a more and more common trait in our country today. We think something is wrong with the system if we don't have what other people have—a big-screen TV, multiple vehicles or a new enough vehicle, the high-tech fifty-row harvester (if that's even a thing), nice enough clothes, the newest phone, or the same health care and benefits that they get over at that other business. We forget that if we all truly got what we deserved by nature, we wouldn't have one second of peace or health or happiness but only torment and misery all the time, because of our sins.

Related to that, did the nine men forget to return thanks because they valued the wrong blessings most? Were they so focused on returning to a good life filled with food, money, and toys, because they forgot that, in Christ, they already had the best life? Did they fail to stop and consider that, if they had been healed from their leprosy, that meant that the reports were true and they had encountered the Messiah, their Savior and Healer from sin, their worst disease and ours too. God daily cleanses us fully and freely from this disease. Even as I speak, Jesus is preparing a place in heaven for you. There isn't a single physical thing you have or own that doesn't perish, spoil, or fade, but you have treasures like that waiting for you in heaven! Even if every earthly blessing were ripped away from you, no one, not even the devil himself, can rob those infinitely more valuable blessings from you. Those blessings mean that, no matter what is going on in your life, you always have abundant reason to return thanks to God.

Another reason that I don't think kept these nine men from returning thanks but does sometimes keep us from doing so is our hardships. I once read about a group of Lutheran immigrants who set sail from Germany in 1845, most of whom were planning to start a colony in Michigan. After arriving in New York City, they took a steamboat to Albany, where they boarded an emigrant car on the back of a freight train bound for Buffalo. As the train started out around 1 p.m., someone, perhaps the pastor, suggested that they sing the hymn we just sang, "Now Thank We All Our God." They finished the first stanza and began the second. Just then their train collided with another train head-on. A number of freight cars were completely demolished and an

unfamiliar man traveling in one of the other coaches died, but the colonists' car miraculously stayed completely intact and they suffered only bruises and minor cuts.

You would think that someone would have said, "Whoa! How ironic is that! We were right in the middle of singing 'Now Thank We All Our God,' thanking him for his protection and love, and God spared all of our lives in a horrible accident!" But they were so shaken up by the incident, it actually caused friction between the pastor and the rest of the group. The pastor thought that they should take the crash as a sign and travel to Buffalo by canal boat, but most of the colonists wanted to save money and try the railroad again. The pastor lost his cool and someone else had to step in between the two sides and help cool things down.

Doesn't that happen to us too? Too often we let our hardships and trials cloud our view of God's blessings, even though oftentimes his best blessings are coming to us precisely through those hardships and trials. Think about these ten lepers. Would they have sought Jesus out, would they have gone looking for mercy from Jesus if they hadn't contracted leprosy? And what happened to nine of them as soon as they were cured and things were going well again? They forgot about the Lord. Don't let hardships hinder you from returning thanks; let them actually cause you to look harder for God's blessings, blessings even in the hardships themselves.

So tomorrow as you celebrate this national holiday with family and friends or all by yourself, don't forget to return thanks to God. And the next day, and the day after that, and every day of your life. Our gracious God has given us all abundant reasons to stop, turn around, and go back and fall at the feet of Jesus in our hearts, and to glorify and thank him loudly for all the good that he has shown us. When he and his grace are at the center of our celebration, tomorrow and every day will truly be a happy Thanksgiving. Amen.