

## Sermon Thanksgiving Eve 2021

November 24, 2021

Luke 17:11-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This evening our sermon text is the Gospel Lesson previously read.

It seems that as we listen to this story, it could be a bit hard to understand in some ways. To be clear, as we have it for the lesson encouraging us to give thanks to God as we observe our national holiday of Thanksgiving, that's not hard to understand. It's not hard to understand why these lepers exemplify those who should give thanks, nor is it hard to understand why the one who did was so grateful that **“when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks.”** That's easy to understand. Especially if you've ever experienced a long-term physical ailment, you can understand why he would have such joy.

All the more, you can understand if you're familiar with what that leprosy meant in the setting of Israel at that time—and I point this out with some regularity, so I assume you are. But to give a refresher, those who were leprous had to be kept separate from everyone else. They were unclean. They couldn't touch those they loved, nor could they live in their homes with them. They were cast away from the society of people in general, that's why they call to Jesus from a distance. This was utterly disruptive to their lives altogether.

It's in light of that, that this is easy to understand the thankfulness, the immense relief this was for this leper. And it's also easy to understand that there is this mercy that Jesus shows them. They called out to Him to have mercy, and He did. Jesus as the God who is able to work all things under His power is able to bring healing to their bodies. But what can be hard to understand is just how deep this mercy really extends and what that means as we look at the case of this leper. It also can be hard to understand just how deep this mercy then extends to us.

To start, it's worth taking a minute to meditate on this word, “mercy.” Now, in the Greek this word is *eleēson*, like when we say, “*Kyrie Eleison*,” “Lord, have mercy.” And that mercy is not just what we often think of with mercy, something I often define as undeserved kindness in not getting the bad that we deserve, but as I was reading it said it should even be connected to a “loving-kindness.” If you remember me talking about the Hebrew word for love, *hesed*, this would be like that. This is

associated with that love of God that's undeserved, that love of God that is giving, that love that sacrifices on behalf of those in need. That's this mercy.

Now, on the one hand, we sort of just say, "Oh yeah, of course, that's so nice that Jesus showed mercy to heal this man." But we have to understand the depth of this mercy. You see this mercy isn't just about healing. It's about cleansing. Look at Jesus' words there—as a note, always look carefully at the words of Scripture. We believe they are given by the Holy Spirit, so word choice is important. So, what did Jesus say? Not, "were not ten healed?" No. "**Were not ten cleansed?**" This is temple and ritual language.

Now, we hear this and we can think, "well, what's that have to do with us? That's all in the Old Testament, that's all that stuff we don't have to follow anymore." And it's true, we thankfully don't have to exempt ourselves from our families if we get the wrong kind of skin disease, all the more, we don't have to exempt ourselves from the gathering of the faith. And because that's the case, we can often think it's superfluous and unnecessary to understand. We can, even more, despise it and find it merely outdated and primitive. But you see, you have to understand what the Lord was teaching the people through it; what the Lord intends you to learn from it.

I often make the point that, in our day, we assume the ability to approach God. If you were here for our Lenten services in the spring on the Letter to the Hebrews, you might remember I had a sermon on the theme that one does not just come into the presence of God. Just like we can understand that we don't just come willy-nilly into the presence of a king or queen, or the president, or whatnot. Or even how we can think of the anxiety someone might get meeting a famous person they respected, God all the more demands reverence. We don't just come into His presence.

I was reminded just yesterday of how this isn't our mindset. I was describing to someone some of the differences between our teaching on things and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and as I did, the response was, "Oh so you guys are like, less formal." I tried to explain that the goal wasn't to be more relaxed, but to emphasize the grace of God more. But for some reason, we like the idea of this God who just a nice guy. We like this picture of God who isn't demanding, who is just like us.

What the Bible teaches isn't that. When we look at the restrictions in the Old Testament, and the sacrifices at the center of their life together, we don't see that either. Instead, we see that this God isn't your buddy that you just chum up with. Oh, no. He's something far grander than that.

What we see in the Bible is the glory of this God who is all powerful. Think about the words we have for the Psalm this coming Sunday, Psalm 24. It starts by saying: **“The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?”** This God is mighty. This God is powerful. This God has the power to create the universe out of nothing. Why should we assume that we can just saunter into His presence like He owes it to us?

And that's what these restrictions showed. They showed that there is a problem coming into His presence. They showed that we are tainted and unclean, not by skin diseases, nor by other ailments, per se—although those do manifest our uncleanness. No, but they show that if you want to come into the presence of this almighty and all-perfect being, you have to be cleansed too. And that's the mercy of Jesus cleansing this leper. It's not just that he's healed. It's that he's cleansed. That's what can be hard to understand.

In fact, if you've heard me preach on this over the years, one of the things you maybe have heard me point out is the possible confusion we could have at Jesus' response to this sequence of events. Think about that. When the one returns, what does Jesus say? **“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?”** When I learned about the Old Testament Law and began to understand about the importance of the Temple and the priests, and when I learned about how the lepers would need to show themselves to the priests to return to ordinary life, I was confused about this a bit. Why would Jesus criticize these nine? They did just what He had told them to do.

But you see, it's because this isn't just about healing and about getting back to an earthly life that's comfortable. In fact, we even see that this life following Christ is at times uncomfortable at its definition, it's this picking up of the cross. And that's because this life in Christ is about the cleansing.

This story that we have here is making that point. In Jesus there is not just the restoration of earthly life for these men. This Jesus is the ultimate Priest, He is the

ultimate Healer, and He cleanses us as the ultimate Sacrifice. It's in this Jesus that we can return not to the temple in Jerusalem, and can be declared clean not by human priests in that building, but instead we can enter into the heavenly dwelling before this holy God declared clean by the High Priest of High Priests, Jesus Himself. Not because we deserve it, not because we're such good buds with God, and not because God is just a guy like us. No, but because that's how immense this mercy is. This is the mercy that trudges through the filth of sin itself and is pierced on the cross for its end to be met in the blood of this ultimately cleansing Lamb. That is what can be so hard to understand. But it's true and it's good.

Christians, as Luke tells us that Jesus saw these lepers far off and cleansed them, He has seen you and cleansed you. He has washed you in His cleansing flood and you are pure. I love the imagery Paul uses to describe this in the fifth chapter of his letter to the church in Ephesus. He says, **“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”** Hear that and know that's for you. You are that baptized bride. You are that bride that was tainted and corrupted, undeserving of His love. And yet He has loved you. That is this mercy. That is the depth of this mercy. Understand it.

Tonight, that is why we give thanks. That's why we, like the Samaritan leper, come before Him and give thanks. We kneel at His presence and give thanks as He did in that first Lord's Supper. And in the depth of His mercy, we get even more grace, more forgiveness in His body and blood. Christians, carry that thanks not only into your minds and hearts for tonight, but into your feasts tomorrow, and into every day.

This gracious Master is so merciful. He is so gracious. His love is so abundant and never ending. Thanks be always to Him. Even when we don't understand. Amen.