

Gratitude: A State of Mind

Luke 17:11-19

In today's lesson we watch and listen as Jesus comes into Bethany, and his journey toward Jerusalem comes ever closer.

Geographically, Jesus is probably somewhere between Samaria and Galilee. The miracle that happens here is not in keeping with his other miracles. The miracle has an unusual skew to it. We have learned to expect Jesus to heal someone and for that healing to happen while Jesus is present. Not here! The lepers who are the object of this remarkable healing are told to do something a bit unusual. You see, Jesus did not heal these people on the spot. Jesus does something that seems a bit out of character, he tells these poor souls to go and show themselves to the priests. It is not really so strange because the instructions are in keeping with the Levitical instructions found in Leviticus 13:1-2, "The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 'When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.' " Jesus, in instructing these ten lepers does so with the intention that they will be healed before they reach their destination.

It is important here for us to pause and understand what it meant to be a person in the time of Jesus who had such a disease. In our world, we may make an analogy by looking toward the AIDS pandemic. People with AIDS are, in many instances, shunned by family and friends. But as horrible as that may be, it pales in comparison to the way lepers were treated in the time of Christ.

These poor souls were forced to stand at a distance from Jesus or anyone else. They had to announce their sickness loud enough so that no one would accidentally rub up against them or touch them in any way. We can only imagine the way these poor people were treated. And, of course, if they were treated poorly, you can be sure their families suffered, as well. As is usually the case, discrimination casts a long and broad shadow.

Now, imagine that you have suffered with this disease and Jesus recognizes your plea for healing and mercy. You are healed; a miracle has happened in your life; your life has quite literally been restored. Do you not think that gratitude would be a natural by-product of this miracle? Wouldn't you be terribly disappointed if nine out of ten of those healed simply walked away without so much as a "thanks"? And who is it that takes the time to acknowledge this wonderful miracle?

All the lepers must have believed that Jesus could perform this remarkable healing. But the only one who takes the time to personally come back and thank Jesus, is a despised Samaritan. It is the Samaritan who has genuine faith.

The Samaritan who returned must have understood that genuine faith involves the recognition that God's mercies are undeserved. Gratitude, therefore, is an essential part of true faith. If there is one shortcoming that is most evident in our world today, it is that people, not all, but many suffer from a condition of ingratitude. God does so much for us. Our indebtedness to God is enormous and yet we rarely offer thanks for what God has done in our lives. In fact, most professing Christians don't even offer thanks over their meals much less offer thanks over all that God does in their lives. We are much like the little boy who was given an orange by a man. The boy's mother asked, "What do you say to the nice man?" The little boy thought and handed the orange back and said, "Peel it."

For a child of God, thankfulness is not confined to a day or a season, it is an attitude that we should have every minute of every day. To magnify this point, I want us to examine the account of the ten lepers in Luke's Gospel and see some important truths concerning an attitude of gratitude.

When we compare our concepts of the Christian life to those of Jesus, we often discover how narrow and limited we are. We live in a time of indifference. We have come to a point in our lives where if a sister or brother offends us, we simply cut them off. Society has taught us that it is easier to cancel our responsibilities than to relate to them. Why respond to his or her desire for reconciliation when we can simply move on with the crowd and not be bothered?

What this shows, of course, is our inability to grasp the importance of what God can do in our lives and in the lives of those we love. Our ideas about the possibilities of faith are shoved to the side and we miss the wonderful opportunity to

be in relation with Jesus showing an attitude of gratitude for all the gifts we are so fortunate to have received. We do not really believe that God can move mountains. We have learned to fly over them, drive over them, or simply remove them! You see, Jesus sets before us a whole new world of wonder. It is a world of new life, and endless possibilities. If we possess even a small amount of the faith of the Samaritan leper, there is no telling what we may experience.

One of the problems with this faith scenario is that it places us at the feet of the Master. It means that all our bragging will have to be put in the closet. We often act as if we feel that we are doing God, and the church, a big favor by gracing them with our presence. We want to be recognized for the things we do for God. After all, without us, the church would fold up like a cheap tent. We fail to remember what we learned in Sunday school as children; that it is impossible for us to do enough for God.

We have already established that these lepers were in an unapproachable position. Here are these men living shut-out lives. But we have good news. The good news is that although the Levitical Law says one thing, Jesus says something quite different. What the law declares out of bounds, Jesus declares within bounds. When the law passes on the other side, Jesus makes it a point to make contact and listen. Jesus came to show us a better way to live life. Jesus went this way on purpose because even in the awful position we sometimes find ourselves, Jesus can reach us and deliver us. My family can't help me, my friends can't help me, the church can't help me, but Jesus can. When they could not get to Jesus, Jesus came to them. We need to understand Jesus will come to us, as well.

Our reading shows clearly that all ten of the lepers were in the same position. They all wanted to be healed of this hideous disease. They all prayed, and they were all healed. Yet only one out of ten bothered to show gratitude for a new life.

It is important to understand how important it is to show in a concrete way that we acknowledge that without God our lives are empty. The Samaritan sets a wonderful example for us all. He saw a reason to praise. He saw that his life was forever changed for the better. He understood that nothing he did or could have done would have ended with the same results. He saw a change that only Jesus could have made possible. He saw an opportunity to praise God and he seized it. Many see their need to pray but don't see their need to praise.

I don't know how it happened; We are not told what it was about him that caused him to go back to Jesus. Maybe as they walked toward the priest's house, he noticed his skin losing that scaly, white appearance. Or maybe they passed people who would ordinarily have turned away in disgust, but now they did not. We don't know why he decided to go back, but when he saw that he was healed he stopped going in one direction, turned around, and began moving in a new direction. He began a new journey of faith, and it led him back to Jesus. He had reason to praise God. They all had reason to praise God, but only one saw it.

We too often build fences around forgiveness, faith, duty, and gratitude. In passages like this one, Jesus encourages us to remove those fences to achieve the possibilities of the Christian life.

Jesus continued his journey toward his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This miracle is one more step in that journey. Today, each of us is asked to join in this journey of faith. Like the Samaritan, we seek Jesus out and ask for healing, and like the Samaritan we have the unique opportunity to say thank you by dedicating our life to God.

What will you do today? Will you join the nine who walked away, or join hands with the one who chose a new direction in life, and seek a new direction for your life? Amen.