

Main Idea: In the story of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19, we learn about the importance of thanking Jesus and what a failure to do so reveals. It's a story about grace, and a story that emphasizes the importance of thanksgiving in responding to grace. There are two scenes in the story.

- I. We see grace (11-14).
  - A. Jesus went to people in need (11).
    1. That's why He was going to Jerusalem.
    2. That's why He approached a northern village.
  - B. Jesus helped people in need (12-14).
    1. Ten men asked for help (12-13).
    2. Ten men received help (14).
- II. We see the response to grace (15-19).
  - A. One man demonstrated gratitude (15-16).
    1. He went back.
    2. He praised God.
    3. He threw himself at Jesus' feet.
    4. He thanked Jesus.
  - B. Nine men demonstrated ingratitude (17-19).
    1. Nine men were willing to take from Jesus.
    2. Only one was willing to give Jesus what He deserves.

Implications: Consider three possibilities...

1. It's possible to settle for the temporal and miss the eternal.
2. It's possible to enjoy the gifts and forget the Giver.
3. It's possible to have reason to give thanks and fail to do so.

When God tells us to do something one time, it's enough. But if He repeats a command multiple times, we'd better take heed. Over and over we hear the following call...

"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name." 1 Chronicles 16:8

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name." Psalm 100:4

"Give thanks to the LORD for he is good." Psalm 136:1

"Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 15:57

"Give thanks in all circumstances." 1 Thes 5:18

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift." 2 Corinthians 9:15

It's pretty clear that thankfulness isn't optional. It's the fitting response to what God has done. The fact is, we are in trouble if we are not thankful. A lack of thanks reveals something about a person's heart. Indeed, a thankless person has a heart problem.

No passage in the Bible makes this any clearer than Luke 17. In Luke 17:11-19 we find a story about ten lepers that experienced the lifechanging touch of Jesus. It's a story about grace, and a story that emphasizes the importance of thanking Jesus in response to His grace.

Why is it so important that we express thanks to the Lord? And what is God's assessment of people who fail to do so? And just what does it mean to be thankful

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a message preached at WBC on 11/28/99

anyway? Is it merely some warm, fuzzy, sentimental feeling? If we're truly thankful, how will it affect our lives? God addresses these very questions for us in the following passage, Luke 17. There are two scenes in the story. In the first scene...

### I. We see grace (11-14).

A word about the setting. Luke wrote this gospel about three decades after Jesus returned to heaven. Luke, a physician by profession, has a keen eye for the poor and is the only gospel writer to record this incident about the ten lepers.

In Luke 15 Jesus used a series of parables to underscore His concern for the lost. Luke 16 records the account of the rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. Luke 17 begins with instruction on what to do when a brother sins, namely, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him (1-4).

Upon hearing this the apostles objected that it was too hard and that they needed more faith (5). To which Jesus said, "You don't need *more* faith. In fact, a mustard-seed-portion of faith is plenty." That's because the issue isn't the size of our faith but the size of the One in whom we place our faith. The key is a having correct perspective of God.

At that point Jesus shared an illustration about duty (7-10). In essence He said, "If you had a servant who worked in your fields all day, would you thank him for doing his job as if he'd gone above the call of duty? No, you wouldn't. He was just doing his job, his *duty*. And if you were that servant, how would you respond at the end of the day? You'd say, 'I've only done my duty.'"

The issue is roles. In that culture, when a servant did his job, he didn't expect his master to say, "Well, thanks for serving me. Next time I'll serve you." No, a servant doesn't expect his master to serve him. He accepts his role as a servant and does the will of his master. In fact, the master isn't obligated to *thank* the servant for his help (the word used in verse 9).

But what if it's the other way around? What if out of his sheer kindness, the master does help the servant? What if the master shows *grace* to his subject and meets a need in his life? How should the servant respond? That's the issue Luke addresses next.

In verses 11-14 we see the Master showing *grace*. Grace is giving people what they don't deserve, right? That's what Jesus did next. Luke mentions two actions of grace.

**A. Jesus went to people in need (11).** "Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee." Don't miss some important details here. We're about to see a miracle occur, but when did it happen? Luke says it took place when Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem.

Is that significant? It sure is. Jesus isn't heading to Jerusalem on a sight-seeing-tour. He is going there *to die*. That's the reason He came into this world. He came on a mission, to give His life as a ransom payment for sinners. Yes...

1. *That's why He was going to Jerusalem.* To rescue people in need. In fact, according to Luke, Jesus has been on His way to Jerusalem for some time now. We find an earlier statement in Luke 13:22, "Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way *to Jerusalem*." The truth is, in a very real sense Jesus has been on His way to Jerusalem since His birth in Bethlehem--and before.

That's grace. Grace is seeing people in need and then going to them. Grace doesn't wait for people to come. Grace initiates. Grace goes to where people are. And that's why Jesus was going to Jerusalem. What's more...

2. *That's why He approached a northern village.* According to verse 11, Jesus was traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. We can probably plug the events of John 11 right in between verses 10 and 11--that's where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Right after raising Lazarus, Jesus made one more northerly tour of ministry before returning to Jerusalem where He would give His life on the cross. And while up north, He intentionally headed for a village near Samaria. We'll see why in a moment.

Which brings us to the second action of grace. First Jesus went to people in need. But since grace does more than observe...

**B. Jesus helped people in need (12-14).** "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!'"

If we'd been in Jesus' shoes we may have thought, "Listen fellows, I'm heading for a Roman cross. In just a matter of weeks I'm going to be beaten, abused, and crucified. I know you have problems, and I'm sorry. But I have my own concerns. I've given and given and given, but now I need to think about myself."

Not Jesus. That's not the way grace works. 2 Corinthians 8:9 tells us, "But you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might be made rich"

Out of His grace, Jesus both went to people in need and then helped them. I wouldn't be here today had it not been for His grace. Nor would you. We're indebted to grace. It was grace that took Jesus to a village near the Samaria-Galilee border that day. And here's what happened...

1. *Ten men asked for help (12-13).* What kind of help? These men had "leprosy."<sup>2</sup> Let that sink in. Leprosy—in the first century an incurable skin disease. These ten men were social outcasts. The law prohibited them from making contact with people in public--lest they contaminate others. They were *unclean*.

Doctors could offer no help nor hope to these men. The best these lepers could do was band together as a community of sorts while they waited to die.

No doubt, it's been months, even years since these ten men have been touched. They have been cut off from family and friends. Their disease has robbed them of home, job, and dignity. They no longer live. They merely exist.

Then one day they heard the news that a special rabbi was coming to town. This was the same rabbi who had healed another leper a couple of years earlier in a Galilean town (recorded in Luke 5:12-14).

The text says they "stood at a distance"--they weren't allowed to come near--and they "called out in a loud voice." Their volume indicates their desperation, their utter admission of need. They had no where else to turn for help.

Listen to their words, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" They called Him by name, "Jesus." They used the title "Master," thus recognizing His unique authority.

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<sup>2</sup>True, the Greek term can refer to various skin diseases and not just leprosy. Whatever affliction these ten men had was so severe that they were outcasts.

That's good, but wait. Is it possible to call Jesus "Master" and not let him be your master? There are people today--as there were in Jesus' day--who are more than willing to say, "Oh, I believe in God. And I believe Jesus is the Son of God, the Lord, the *Master*. In fact, I believe Jesus can do great things."

But something's missing. What? We'll see in a moment.

Notice that the ten lepers didn't specifically ask for healing, but for pity (or mercy in the KJV). Yet there's no question what form they hoped that pity would take.

"Have pity on us!" they said. It's worth noting that they didn't say, "We deserve better! You owe us! You're a Healer, so do something!"

No, no. They asked for mercy. "Please don't give us what we deserve. Have pity on us!"

Answer this. What do we deserve, according to the Bible? We are sinners, and what we deserve is to experience the just consequences of our sin. By definition, sin is *going your own way*, refusing to live in submission to the Creator. And sin alienates. It cuts us off from God and from others. And that's what we deserve as sinners.

Furthermore, that's what hell will be like. Being alone forever--separated from God and from everyone else. These ten lepers had each other but in hell there will be no *each other*, just *eternal aloneness*.

That's why Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem, so we don't have to receive what we deserve. There on the cross the Sinless Savior took upon Himself what we deserve. He suffered eternal alienation in our place, so that He might reconcile us to the Father. Three days later He conquered death, and now offers eternal life to all who will repent and believe in Him.

Beloved, that's grace. Indeed, our only hope is grace. We can't reach God. He's not impressed with us. The truth is, as He tells us in His Word, He's offended when we refuse to admit our depraved condition and naively think we can merit His favor by our own righteous deeds (Isaiah 64:6; Titus 3:5).

This is the greatest of news. What we can't earn God *gives* us freely. He gives eternal life to all who will place their trust in His Son, Jesus. That's grace.

So here were ten lepers. By the way, in verse 16 we're told that one was a Samaritan. The implication is that some if not all of the others were Jews. Ponder the implications. In the first century, these two races hated each other. That's the way it was.

But not for these ten men. Listen to William Barclay's assessment (217), "In the common tragedy of their leprosy they had forgotten they were Jews and Samaritans and remembered only they were men in need." Isn't it interesting how major barriers become petty when we're in need? How ironic that leprosy brought together men who otherwise would have had nothing to do with each other.

And now they're coming to Jesus together. They have nothing to offer to the Rabbi so they don't try. Instead, they plead for mercy. Consequently, here's what happened...

2. *Ten men received help (14)*. "When he saw them, he said, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.'"

Stop there. Why did Jesus tell them to go to the priests? When Jesus healed a leper in Luke 5:12 He did it by touching him. But this time He tells these lepers to go to the priests. Why? We're not told. For sure Jesus can do *what* He wants, *when* He wants, and

*how* He wants--for He is the Lord. We have no right to put Jesus in a box and place our expectations upon Him.

One thing we do know is that Jesus was fulfilling Old Testament instructions. In the Torah God told the Israelites to do when a leper was cured. Go to the priests. According to the Law, the priest acted as a sort of health inspector to certify that an actual cure had in fact occurred (Lev 14:2ff.).

That's significant. Jesus is upholding the Law. What's more, He's putting the faith of these ten lepers to the test. He's asking them to take Him at His Word and act as though they'd already been cured.<sup>3</sup>

Which they did. Verse 14 concludes, "And as they went, they were cleansed." When were they cleansed? *As they went*. They weren't healed yet when they took the first step towards the temple in Jerusalem. I don't how far they went--the text doesn't indicate. But all of a sudden, their rotted flesh became as smooth as a baby's soft skin, their stubs were restored, and their disfigured noses and appendages were whole. As they went they were *cleansed!*

You see, faith is not saying, "God, if you do what I ask *then* I'll believe in You." No, faith is taking God at His Word and trusting Him to do what He said He would do.

Some of you are waiting for God to act. Wait no longer. Obey His command.

So ends scene one. In the first scene we see grace. In scene #2...

## II. We see the response to grace (15-19).

The truth is, there are in essence only two responses to grace. It's no different today than it was when Jesus walked on this earth, and in this story we see both responses in living color. First of all...

**A. One man demonstrated gratitude (15-16).** The text reads, "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."

This is the response of gratitude. In our story it's evidenced by four deeds.

1. *He went back*. Again, we don't know how far he had gone, but when this man saw that his disease was gone, he did a 180 and went back.

2. *He praised God*. And Luke makes it clear he did it in a *loud* voice. A few minutes earlier he used a loud voice to focus Jesus' attention on his need. Now he uses his voice to call attention to God.

Frankly, there's a lesson here for us. Many of us are quick to pray, but slow to praise. When we're in need we make the need known, but when God graciously meets the need we clam up. "Well, I'm shy. I don't like to sing out in church or talk about the Lord in public. I don't want people thinking I'm some kind of radical."

Really? If your house was on fire and you were helplessly trapped in an upper room, would you have trouble yelling at the top of your lungs for the fireman outside? And afterwards, wouldn't you also want to tell people about the person who risked his life to save you? Would you care if people called you *radical*?

This man didn't care what people thought. His attention was fixed on *one* person. So he went back, praised God, and thirdly...

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce, 258

3. *He threw himself at Jesus' feet.* That's an act of worship. That's an admission of the worth of Jesus. He didn't just bow. He lunged to his face at the feet of Jesus.

Sadly, far too often we get it turned around. We think Jesus exists for us like some Genie in a bottle. Wrong. We exist for Him. He saves us so we will worship Him with our lives. This man understood that. Which is why fourthly...

4. *He thanked Jesus.* This was no perfunctory, matter of fact "Thanks Jesus." Remember, this man is prostrate before the Savior. I don't know exactly what he said, perhaps words like these, "Oh, how can I ever thank You enough? Praise be to God! Thank You! Thank You! Thank You! I owe my life to You!"

At this point Luke throws an interesting detail into the narrative. At the end of verse 16 we're given this information—"and he was a *Samaritan*." From a human perspective, if any person would be hesitant to return and say thanks to a Jewish healer, it would be a Samaritan.

What's more, the basic perception by the Jews concerning Samaritans was that they were *unsavable*. The Samaritans had perverted God's Word by creating their own Bible, and they had twisted God's worship by establishing a rival temple in Samaria. The Samaritans were considered *unclean*, vile, and beyond saving.

But Jesus specializes in saving the unsavable! No one is too far gone for Him. If we've been saved, it's *by grace*. And the appropriate response to grace is *gratitude*.

There's an activity that most children love to do--our girls always did. You give a child a specially constructed picture and ask her to find and circle the things that seem out of place. For instance, one picture may be a farm scene. There's a barn, a white board fence, some animals, and some trees in the background. No problem so far. But as the child studies the picture she notices a cow standing in one of the trees. And a pig with a saddle on it. And a polar bear drinking from the water trough. You get the idea--things that are inappropriate for the scene at hand.

Now answer this. What's wrong with this picture? Jesus heals ten lepers. One of the men returns to say thanks. It's obvious, isn't it? Where are the other nine men? I mentioned that there are two responses to grace, both portrayed in this story. One man demonstrated gratitude. Sadly...

**B. Nine men demonstrated ingratitude (17-19).** Jesus asks some pointed questions in verses 17-18. Remember the Sovereign Lord doesn't ask questions to get information. He's omniscient. His intent is to make a point, to teach truth. "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?'"

What's wrong with this picture? There's a glaring contradiction. Simply put...

1. *Nine men were willing to take from Jesus.* But...

2. *Only one was willing to give Jesus what He deserves.* Where were the other lepers? Someone has suggested the following nine reasons why the nine did not return: One waited to see if the cure was real. One waited to see if it would last. One said he would see Jesus later. One decided that he had never had leprosy. One said he would have gotten well anyway. One gave the glory to the priests. One said, "O, well, Jesus

didn't really do anything." One said, "Any rabbi could have done it." One said, "I was already much improved."<sup>4</sup>

I don't know why the nine men didn't return. For sure, all ten men had equal reason to return. But only one did. Maybe the others were so wrapped up in their new-found happiness that they didn't even think about the One who made it possible. It's not the last time that a person got what he wanted from the Lord, left, and never even looked back.

At this point Jesus says something very remarkable to the Samaritan man. Verse 19—"Then he said to him, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well.'"

Wait. The other nine were "well" too, weren't they? What does Jesus mean? Those are the same words Jesus spoke to the repentant woman who anointed His feet in Luke 7:50. The words "made you well" come from the Greek word *sozo* which is translated "save" throughout the New Testament. The literal translation reads, "Your faith has saved you." Warren Wiersbe observes, "The Samaritan's nine friends were declared clean by the priest, but he was declared *saved* by the Son of God!"<sup>5</sup>

Don't miss this. Ten men went to their homes that night for the first time in a long while. They had this in common. They'd been healed by Jesus. But there was one big difference. To put it plainly, ten had clean bodies, but only one had a clean soul--the one who responded to grace with gratitude.

What does this story teach us? I see three warnings here.

Implications: Consider three possibilities...

*Warning #1: It's possible to settle for the temporal and miss the eternal.* I'd like to pose a difficult question. Did the nine men who failed to return have faith in Jesus? Remember, they too took Jesus at His Word when He said to go to the priests.

According to the Bible there are different kinds of faith. According to James 2:19 the demons believe, but it's not a saving faith.

You see, some people believe in Jesus with a less-than-saving faith. Their marriage is crumbling so they call out to God, "Help, Lord! I believe you can put our marriage back together." They're struggling with a financial crunch so they pray, "Lord, I need Your help. I believe You can change things." Maybe it's a physical problem, "Lord, I'm asking You to heal me. I believe You can do it."

Is it good to turn to God with these kinds of problems? Absolutely! But a person can turn to God for the temporal and miss the eternal. Isn't that what the nine men did in Luke 17?

Perhaps that describes you, too. You believe in Jesus--you wouldn't likely be in church this morning if you didn't. But have you ever come to Him, not just to patch up your life, but to save your soul? Have you ever come to grips, not just with what Jesus *can* do for you, but with what He deserves *from you*? Please, don't settle for the temporal and miss the eternal. Consider a second, related warning...

*Warning #2: It's possible to enjoy the gifts and forget the Giver.* Beloved, an ungrateful heart is evidence of an unchanged heart. It's been well said, "An unthankful heart is fertile soil for all kinds of sins."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, a primary evidence of saving

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<sup>4</sup>Charles L. Brown, *Content the Newsletter Newsletter*, June 1990, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Wiersbe, p. 245.

<sup>6</sup>Warren Wiersbe, p. 245.

faith is thankfulness. Some people want to *use* Jesus, but a true Christian desires to *worship* Him.

We have a hymn in our hymnbooks entitled, *Now Thank We All Our God*. What you may not know about this song is the situation out of which it came.<sup>7</sup> Martin Rinkhart wrote this thanksgiving hymn during the Thirty Years' War during one of the most challenging times of his life. Martin was a pastor, and at the time he was conducting as many as forty funerals a day, including that of his own wife. He wrote these words as a table grace for his family. In the midst of war and plague and with a heart full of sorrow, he was able to give thanks to the Lord. Here's what he wrote:

*"Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom His world rejoices;  
Who from our mother's arms hath blest us on our way  
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God thro' all our life be near us  
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;  
And keep us in His grace, and guide us when perplexed,  
And free us from all ills in this world and the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,  
The Son and Him who reigns with them in highest heaven,  
The one eternal God whom earth and heaven adore;  
For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore."*

I see one final warning in this story...

*Warning #3: It's possible to have reason to give thanks and fail to do so.* God has done so much for us. Have you thanked Him? And better yet, are you thanking Him with a life that brings honor to Him? He's worthy, dear friend, worthy of our thanks.

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<sup>7</sup>As told by Warren Wiersbe, p. 245