

THANKFUL FAITH

Luke 17:11–19

Key Verse: 17:19

“And he said to him, ‘Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.’”

What would you say are the best times in life? Is it when you finally get what you want? Maybe it's a big financial gain, or a great achievement? Is it when you can finally take a break, or get to go to a special place? Today's passage contains the story of a man who comes back to thank Jesus. He's so joyful, it seems he's the happiest man alive. Why is he so happy? What does it mean to us?

In this travel section of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is constantly moving toward Jerusalem, where sufferings, rejection and death on a cross await him. On his way, he's criticized by the religious leaders. At the same time, he's been telling parables, and through them, he's been training his disciples to live as his servants in the future. Today's passage is unique, found only in Luke's Gospel. And in this travel section, it's one of only five times that a healing of Jesus is recorded.¹ It's unforgettable: the healing of these ten lepers shows the compassion Jesus has for people living on the margins, whom everyone else shuns and ignores. It's also an example of what faith is. Most of all, it's a powerful lesson on how we all should be responding to Jesus. Are we responding to Jesus like this man? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Look at verse 11. “On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee.” In this area, only a few people lived. To the north, Galilee was mainly Jewish; to the south, Samaria was a despised place. It was because its Jewish people had been forced to intermarry with foreigners. They also set up their own idols as places of worship. Racism and religious differences made relations between these two regions impossible. Though they lived next to each other, they ignored one another and lived like the other group didn't exist. It's surprising that Jesus is traveling there. What's he doing? Knowing what's on his heart, he's looking for any lost ones God wants him to find.

Look at verse 12. “And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance...” This no-man's land was a perfect place for lepers to live without being bothered. Leprosy is a skin disease. It was feared as contagious, progressive, and terminal. So, lepers had to live outside a village, as far away from others as possible. These ten lepers probably are from both Galilee and Samaria. But the leprosy has erased all their mutual prejudices, and now they're together, helping each other. Dire suffering can do that to people. Jesus, always traveling with his

¹ cf. 11:14; 13:12–13; 14:1–4; 18:35–43

twelve disciples and other helpers, is trying to enter this local village, probably to get some food and water. But he's being met by this group of lepers. All ten of them have to stand at a distance, due to their disease.

What do they do? Read verse 13. "...and lifted up their voices, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.'" Several things jump out at us here. First of all, they immediately recognize that it's Jesus. Maybe they've called out to some stragglers in his group, asking who he is. But *why* are they so interested in *Jesus*? Why are they begging him for mercy? Obviously, the report about him has reached all the way here. Early on in his ministry, Jesus became famous for touching and healing a leper (5:12–15). This one fact could give anyone hope. These ten lepers, living way out here, could never dream of getting anywhere near Jesus. But this is their lucky day! It's actually Jesus, *right here!* No wonder they start yelling, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." It's notable that they call him "Master." This one word shows they believe that Jesus has mastery over the worst diseases. Finally, this word "mercy" is heart-moving. Throughout this Gospel, Luke repeats that God's "mercy" is for the most desperate, humiliated people.²

How does Jesus respond to their cry? It's not a convenient time for him. He's focused on helping his disciples. But look at verse 14a. "When he saw them he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.'" When he sees them, surely his heart is moved with compassion. But why does he say this? Going to the priests was how God told his people to deal with cases of leprosy. The priests had to learn how to carefully examine people to check for skin diseases and see if they were really leprous or not (Lev.13–14). But, those who were already known to have leprosy wouldn't go to a priest, because their condition was incurable. So, in telling them to go to the priests, Jesus is basically saying, "Expect to be healed. Trust me." He didn't touch them. He didn't really interact with them in any other way. He just gave them a command: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Why? He's teaching them to act in faith based on his word. The only way they can do this is to believe his word. His word would have to be their hope. As we saw in their initial encounter with him, the first stage of faith is to cry out to Jesus for his mercy. This second stage of faith is to act based on his word. So many people say so many nice things, and it sounds like they believe. But real faith gets going when we actually start doing something based on Jesus' word.

What happens? Look at verse 14b. "And as they went, they were cleansed." It happens on the way, while they're walking. This is such a beautiful miracle! These ten people have incurable leprosy, but when they act based only on the word of Jesus, they're completely healed! It shows us once again the power of Jesus' word. Whatever our problems may be, may God help us cry out to Jesus for mercy. And may God help us take action based on his word, so that we may experience his power and his healing.

But all this is only the beginning. What's next? Read verse 15. "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice..." He doesn't even make it to the village to see the priests. On his way there, when he notices he's actually healed, the

² 1:50,54,58,72,78; 10:37; 16:24; 17:13; 18:38–39

man is overcome with emotion. He can't contain himself. It says he starts praising God "with a loud voice." His praise is not cranial; it's wholehearted. He knows this healing is from God himself. What especially stands out here is that he "turned back." Turned back to where? He turns back to Jesus. In the midst of his joy over his healing, he stops in his tracks, remembers Jesus, and turns back to him.

And what does he do? Look at verse 16a. "...and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks." There's no distance anymore. No doubt he's crying. He's on his face, at the feet of Jesus, feeling so unworthy. He totally humbles himself. It says he's "giving him thanks." He can't just take this healing and go his own merry way. He's got to come back to this amazing person and show him how truly grateful he is. He wants to give all the credit of his healing to his Master, Jesus. It seems that, to this man, getting to be with Jesus and thank him is even more important than being healed of the leprosy.

And then comes the kicker. The last part of verse 16 says, "Now he was a Samaritan." In Greek, the word "he" is emphasized. It's shocking. But maybe not. Luke has already told us Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, it was another Samaritan who was better than a Jewish priest and Levite. Earlier, Luke also recorded an encounter with a Roman centurion, when Jesus said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (7:9b). Now again, in today's passage, a non-Jew, a Samaritan, is the hero.

At this moment, Jesus stops to draw everyone's attention to him. Read verses 17–18. "Then Jesus answered, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'" These three rhetorical questions are meant to drive home a point. What is it? In life, we all experience various things. Some are big, some are small everyday experiences. Do we acknowledge them all as blessings? Do we realize that they actually come from God? Do we personally ever come back to God, not for more, but just to praise and thank him? In the case of this man, he experienced the merciful healing of Jesus. He was cleansed of hideous leprosy. It symbolizes being cleansed from sin. Do we realize what Jesus has actually done for us? Do we see how hopeless we were in our sin, and how Jesus gave us his grace to heal and save our soul? In light of this man, we should ask ourselves, "What's my greatest treasure? Is it my human blessings? My family? Financial stability? Achievements? Or is it the healing grace of Jesus in my life?"

A key word in this passage is the word "thanks" (16). In Greek, it's "euchariston." In the Bible, almost always this word is directed to God himself. It's where we get our word "eucharist," meaning communion. It points to the greatest blessing of all, how Jesus broke his body and shed his blood to save us from our sins (22:17–20). We need to receive this grace of God not just at the beginning of our Christian life, but regularly. The root of the word "eucharist" is "charis." It means three things: "beauty, grace and thanks." His grace makes us beautiful, graceful, thankful people. We can be such people only when we experience the grace of Jesus personally.

We should be thankful for the grace of Jesus, and thankful at special times in our lives. But the Bible tells us that being thankful to God should be our general spirit, in all that we do; our

thankfulness should even be spreading.³ How can we have such a thankful spirit? It's as we live in a Christ-centered community. Paul says: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col.3:12–17).

We should think more about the fact that this man is a Samaritan. With his questions, Jesus especially emphasizes it. What does it mean to us? Actually, it's a rebuke. This man represents all those living outside a community of faith. He's a most unlikely person. But *he's* the one who's so grateful. Likewise, sometimes a non-Christian can seem more grateful than many so-called Christians enjoying so many privileges. We human beings all have a tendency to take things for granted. It's our sinful nature (Rom.1:21). We take all God's blessings in our lives, and his people, for granted. We take our church for granted. Worst of all, we take the grace of Jesus for granted. Jesus is calling us out. Are you entitled? Do you think you've earned and deserved many things by all your sacrifice and hard work? Or do you see yourself as an "unworthy servant" because of the grace of Jesus? Are you critical and grumpy, or is your heart and mind filled with thanks to God?

Read verse 19. "And he said to him, 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.'" The man had faith not just to receive Jesus' healing, but faith to come back to him and give him thanks. It shows us the final stage of faith: coming to Jesus personally to give him the thanks he deserves. Even if no one else is thanking Jesus, we should.

Jesus says, "...your faith has made you well." It literally says, "your faith has saved you." Jesus recognizes this man's thankful faith in him as saving faith. In Luke's Gospel Jesus repeats these words "your faith has made you well" or "your faith has saved you" four times (7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). Jesus doesn't say, "I healed you," but "your faith has healed you." What does it mean? It's the gospel: Jesus is telling us that for our salvation, only faith in him is necessary. This good news of salvation by faith alone is for anyone—even lepers, even the most despised people. It's a faith that brings us close to all God's true people. What's more, growing in thankful, Christ-centered faith like this man brings real healing. Being thankful because of his grace brings real healing. It's a faith that truly makes Jesus our Lord. And what does it mean to be "made well"? It means to be living in a thankful love relationship with Jesus. If this relationship doesn't seem real to us, we probably still need healing.

May God fill us with the compassion of Jesus for people whose souls are sick, who are so isolated, lost, and hopeless. May God help us grow in real faith to cry out to Jesus for his mercy,

³ Rom.1:21; 14:6; 2Cor.4:16; 9:12; Eph.5:4,20; Phil.4:6; Col.2:7; 3:15–17; 4:2; 1 Thess.5:18; 1Tim.2:1; 4:4

to obey his word, and to come back to him to thank him. Most of all, may God help us all to experience the grace of Jesus personally and be filled with wholehearted thanks and praise to God.