

WPC
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The Tenth Leper
Leviticus 13:45-46; Luke 17: 11-19

The Law concerning lepers is about as clear as it can be in Leviticus (Lev. 13:45-46): The leper “shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

So lepers kept themselves distant from healthy people, they formed their own colonies, and they positioned themselves near roadways in order to beg for charity. And if they were somehow healed of their leprosy, the law required that they show themselves to a priest.

What do we learn from this story of Jesus and the ten lepers? One lesson, of course, is that not everybody is grateful for being helped. Does that correspond with your own experience? One commentator says, “Only one out of ten people you help, or try to reach, will respond in any significant way. If we expect it to be this way, we will not be discouraged by reality.” (Van Blair) Not everyone will send you thank you notes; not everyone will be grateful for your help.

Doug Adams, a professor at Pacific School of Religion for 31 years before his death in 2007, liked to lead his class in a sort of reunion of the nine lepers who didn't give their thanks. In other words, he asked students to put themselves in place of those 9 and make up reasons why they never came back to say thank you to Jesus for healing them. He also had 5 or 6 judges at the reunion who would hold up cards and score each leper's response. He found that people shared some very inventive excuses.

One person said he was so thankful that he wanted to spread the word about Jesus to others and so did not have any time to go back and thank him in person; he was sure Jesus would understand. Another person said she was so eager to see family members she had not seen for so long that she forgot all about Jesus. Another person said she had such shabby clothing that the first thing she wanted to do was go to the mall and buy a new wardrobe.

Sometimes, Adams questioned the judges as to why they gave the scores they did. Usually the reason for the score revealed the judge's own values. For example, those who gave a high score for the excuse about needing a better wardrobe were often well dressed and said they enjoyed shopping. One judge who usually gave a low score but in one case gave a high score was asked, "Do you know that person to whom you just gave a high score?" And he had to admit, "She's my wife."

Only one excuse ever scored a perfect ten from all the judges. This student explained, “I did not thank Jesus right away because I followed what he told us to do: to go show ourselves to the priests. After I had done that, I went back to find Jesus to thank him; but he moved around a lot and had left each place I looked for him. I persisted but never found him; but I did find Peter. I said, ‘Peter, I am looking for Jesus. Where is Jesus?’ And Peter looked around the courtyard, cursed, and responded, ‘I don’t know any Jesus.’”¹ You can see why that one got a perfect 10.

But is it really fair to criticize the nine lepers for not coming back and thanking Jesus? Notice that the nine lepers went to do as they were told, to have the priests in Jerusalem certify their cures and restore them to society. “But one did not do as he was told. One, when he saw that he was healed, cried out, turned back, and did not rest until he lay on his face in the dirt at Jesus’ feet, praising God and giving thanks. He made a spectacle of himself, all the more so once he was recognized as a Samaritan” (Barbara Brown Taylor). There was bitter tension between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were considered to be ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, and religiously heretics, though as Fred Craddock points out, in leper colonies, the health

¹ Douglas Adams, *The Prostitute in the Family Tree*, p. 75-77.

problem they shared rendered Jew/Gentile distinctions unimportant and irrelevant.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, “This Samaritan was, in other words, a double outsider – once by virtue of his leprosy and twice by virtue of his non-Jewish blood. He was one of the unclean who saw what the clean could not see, and who refused to be separated from what gave him life.”

The tenth leper’s response certainly had an effect on Jesus. All of a sudden he started asking questions: ‘Weren’t there ten lepers here a minute ago? Where are the other nine? Is this foreigner the only one who knows how to say thank you?’ he said, and then he turned to the tenth leper. ‘Rise and go your way,’ he said; ‘your faith has made you well.’ Or straight from the Greek, ‘Your faith has saved you.’ (Luke 19:9 same word is used to say that “salvation” has come to Zacchaeus because Jesus came to seek and “to save” the lost.)

Once you stop to think about it, this is all very odd. Didn’t Jesus tell all ten to go show themselves to the priests? And didn’t nine do what they were told? Didn’t this last one, in fact, not do what he was told? And weren’t all ten healed? Then how come this one got told his faith had made him well? Weren’t all ten made well? What is going on here?

Taylor says, “Ten were healed of their diseases, but only one was saved. Ten were declared clean and restored to society, but only one was said to have faith. Ten set out for Jerusalem to claim their free gifts as they were told, but only one turned back and gave himself to the Giver instead. Ten behaved like good lepers, good Jews: only one, a double loser, behaved like a man in love. There is a lot going on here.” The most important thing we learn from this story is that the Samaritan, the leper who is thankful, receives healing of much more than just the body. It’s the story of the salvation of a foreigner.

Tony Campolo made a similar point when he spoke at SPU a number of years ago. He told a story of a time he was in McMinnville, OR, in a Nazarene Church, and while leading a service, he noticed that he had a vial of oil in his jacket pocket that somebody had given him several weeks before. On an impulse, he said, “If anybody needs healing, please come forward at the end of the service. Now let me tell you, I don’t expect much to happen. But if you’re willing to do it anyway, come on forward. And don’t be in a hurry, because I want to talk with each of you in depth and get a feel for where you’re coming from and what’s going on in your life.”

To his amazement, about 30 people came forward. It was amazing, as he talked with people, and prayed with them, and anointed their heads with

oil. He found that most of them didn't have physical ailments. People were suffering from broken marriages, various addictions, etc. The most common ailment in that group was depression. But there were also some physically ill people.

About a week and a half later, he got a telephone call. A lady said, "We were in the McMinville Church of the Nazarene when you were there, and you laid hands on my husband for healing. He had cancer." Campolo immediately picked it up, "HAD cancer." He said, "Had cancer?" She said, "He's dead." He thought, "Terrific. Campolo prays for you, and you're gone."

He apologized profusely, and she said, "Please, you don't understand. When he walked into that church, he hated God. He was 58 years old and he wanted to see his grandchildren grow up. And he was going to die, and he knew it, and he hated God.

He would lie in bed and curse God. And the more bitter he became towards God, the nastier he treated everyone around him. No one wanted to be in the same room with him, he was so angry, so bitter, so mean. We tried to keep our distance.

You laid hands on him, you anointed his head with oil, you prayed for him, and he went out of that church transformed. He was full of joy, full of

ecstasy. The last week of our lives together was the best week we've ever had. We sang hymns, we remembered the past, we told stories. I hated to go to bed at night. It was the best week of our lives, and I'm just calling to thank you. **He wasn't cured, but he was healed.**"

Cures don't have any lasting significance. Even the miracles of Jesus, except for his own resurrection, had no lasting significance. He healed the sick and the lepers, he even raised up Lazarus from the dead, and then what happened? They eventually died. He fed 5000 people with a few pieces of fish and bread, and the next day, they were hungry again. And you can be sure all of the lepers he cured, even the tenth one, eventually died.

If somebody's cured, it's only temporary. We're all going to die anyway. But the healing of a person's spirit has eternal significance. The tenth leper was not only cured, but also truly healed. He received salvation. May it be so also with us. Amen.