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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE GRATEFUL LEPER”
Luke 17:11-19

○ **“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good... Give thanks to the God of gods... Give thanks to the Lord of lords... Give thanks to the God of heaven”** (Psalm 136:1-3, 26).

○ **“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ”** (First Thessalonians 5:18).

‡ For what gifts do you **“give thanks to the LORD”**? If you were to proclaim out loud the ten blessings that you most appreciate, what would they be?

‡ But this begs the question: Do we **“give thanks”**? Do you and I fulfill **“God’s will for [us] in Christ”**? If the NSA put me under surveillance 24/7 would my words and deeds reveal deep gratitude to God?

□ Please turn with me to Luke 17:11-19.

■ According to verse 11 Messiah is **“on his way to Jerusalem.”** He has already warned his disciples that he is going there in order to {Lk 9:22} **“suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and...be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”** (Thank you, Jesus! Amen? Amen!)

At the moment, he is **“[traveling] along the border between Samaria and Galilee.”** Geography *per se* is not a factor in this narrative; even so, the name **“Samaria”** always grabs my attention, because every time it (or

“Samaritan”) appears in the Gospels something interesting or unexpected happens.

■ Verses 12-13: **“As he [is] going into a village, ten men who [have] leprosy [meet] him”** on the outskirts of town. **“They [stand] at a distance and [call] out in a loud voice, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’”**

☑ That word translated **“leprosy”** is an umbrella term that covers an array of skin disorders, with symptoms ranging from harmless discoloration to scaly patches to weeping ulcers to rotting body parts. Some lepers look and smell like walking corpses.

● {Lev 13:46} Whether the symptoms are mild or severe, leprosy is an all-encompassing condition. It controls where these men dwell (**“outside the [community]”**), how they dress (as though in mourning), how they survive (dependent on the mercy of others), and how they communicate (announcing their approach by crying out, **“Unclean! Unclean!”**).

Worse yet, leprosy defines their identity. No 1st century Jew merely *has* leprosy: he or she is a leper. It is as if the pathogen penetrates the victim’s soul, fouling their inmost being, deforming their essence.

The horrific economic, physiological, psychological, and social impact of this disease can hardly be overstated. Lepers do not live; they exist. Even when a sufferer’s symptoms are so mild that they can survive for decades, they have one foot in the grave at all times.

● We get a sense of this in Leviticus 13:45-46: **“Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear**

torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.”

Some forms of leprosy are contagious. The leprous exclamation **“Unclean!”** helps to keep the disease from spreading.

But that is a secondary concern. The main reason lepers shout **“Unclean!”** is to protect others from *ritual* defilement, religious or spiritual impurity that is caused by contact with an unclean person or object.

Defilement is troublesome and upsetting. Defiled Jews are excluded from corporate worship and public life. In most cases the defilement can be reversed, but it takes money, effort, and time.

I used to assume this defilement was about the contagion of sin. It is not.

We know this, because every leper is required to: 1) **“wear torn clothes”**; 2) **“let their hair be unkempt”**; and 3) **“cover the lower part of their face.”** In Leviticus {10:6; 21:10} and Ezekiel {24:17, 22} we discover that these are cultural expressions of grief, specifically grief at the death of a loved one. Lepers are commanded to live in perpetual mourning.

But what does this have to do with ritual defilement? Why must they shout, **“Unclean!”**

☠ Hear the Word of the LORD in Numbers 19:13: **“Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days.”**

☠ And in Numbers 19:16: **“Anyone...who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days.”**

And so on. Is the picture coming into focus?

☠ If it is still a bit fuzzy consider Numbers 12:12, in which a leper is said to have the flesh of a corpse. And also Second Kings 5:7, where healing a leper is equated with resurrecting the dead.

☠ Our lepers in Luke 17 **“wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt”** and **“cover the lower part of their [faces]”** because they are mourning their own deaths! Last Sunday I cautioned that **“Death is coming for us,”** but for these poor souls it has already arrived; it is just taking a while to finish the job.

☠ Our lepers in Luke 17 go about crying **“Unclean!”** to spare others from being defiled by their still-mobile corpses. They are the walking dead!

■ No wonder they **“[call] out in a loud voice”** (verse 13), **“Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”**

■ He does just that. Verse 13a: **“When [the Lord sees] them, he [says], ‘Go, show yourselves to the priests.’”** Only the priests are certified to pronounce a Jewish person ritually clean or unclean.

■ **“And as they [go]”** (verse 13b), **“they [are] cleansed.”**

All discoloration, scaliness and ulcers disappear! All rotting body parts are restored! The disease is gone! The ten are saved *from pain for*

comfort, *from isolation for inclusion, from idleness for productivity, from poverty for provision, from grief for joy, from death for life!*

■ Verses 15-16: “**One of them,**” who happens to be a Samaritan, “**when he [sees] he [is] healed,**” does what?

★ He “[comes] **back.**” Intentionally seeking the presence of the Lord reveals gratitude to God.

★ He “[praises] **God in a loud voice.**” Words of adoration to the Lord reveal gratitude to God.

★ He “[throws] **himself at Jesus’ feet.**” Humbling oneself before the Lord reveals gratitude to God.

★ And he “[thanks Jesus].” Literally saying “**Thank you**” to the Lord reveals gratitude to God.

Is anyone surprised at his effusive display of gratitude? Messiah has just given him his life back!

■ What *is* shocking is that he is alone. In verses 17-18 Jesus asks “**Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?**”

Why the nine exhibit blatant ingratitude is an intriguing question. Speculating about it might provide us with some practical points of application.

{Lk 18:11} However, Scripture is silent on the matter. Our theorizing might well put us on theological thin ice. And we might be tempted to say “**God, I thank you that I am not like**” those nine!

Let’s take a different approach. I am going to share how this narrative intersects my life, and I invite you to reflect on how it intersects yours.

† 1st point of intersection: I used to be one of the walking dead.

When I was a boy an older neighbor invaded my life in a terrible way. His sin infected my heart and mind with shame, false guilt, and a pervasive sense of pollution.

He eventually stopped, but the sickness inside kept getting worse. I felt dirty, repulsive and absolutely alone.

Years of depression came to a head the summer after my sophomore year in college. Some nights I went up on the roof of my nine-story building, dangled my feet over the edge and argued with myself about jumping off.

I was already half-dead. Why wouldn’t I end my misery by bringing my body into line with my soul?

† 2nd point of intersection: I called to the Lord and he saved me.

One night I came to the end of myself. If I went up on the roof I would have jumped. Instead, I cried out, “O God, save me!” His presence filled the room and he said: “I love you! You will not die by your own hand.”

My suicidal thoughts instantly disappeared, never to return! The process of learning how to embrace life and freedom took years (and I have not yet completed it) – but the Lord restored my rotting soul in one moment!

I invited Christ into my heart in 1971, when I was five years old. But it was in July 1986 that he saved me from death and raised me to new life!

† 3rd point of intersection: I give thanks to God.

I have countless reasons for gratitude and I express it. I praise God for the overt blessings: life; salvation; marriage with an incredible woman; lovely daughters who are growing in grace; you; abundant material provision; and so on, etc., etc., etc.

I praise him for the hidden blessings: the suffering he has utilized to conform me to his Son's likeness; the good things he has denied so I can have the best; the hardships that cultivate faith, hope, and *αγαπη* [agapē] in me; and so forth, etc., etc., etc.

Gratitude is a dominant attitude in my life. I am not boasting in myself, but in the Lord! This is his doing.

† 4th intersection: sometimes I am not grateful.

Too often I regard God's provision not as a gift, but as something he owes me. Too often I am not satisfied with God's generosity, and wish I had more. Too often I am not content with God's blessings, and envy others who appear to be more blessed. Too often I realize God's amazing goodness, yet I fail to say "Thank you."

Holy God, have mercy on me! Openhanded God, have mercy on me! For the sake of your Son, pardon me for my ingratitude! Open my eyes, renew my mind, and change my heart so I can relish your kindness and testify to your generosity, to the glory of your Name!

The details, and even the broad outline, of your story might be very different from mine. Even so, the Living God is speaking to all of us through today's text. Please, listen to his voice and respond with gratitude!

"Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good... Give thanks to the God of gods... Give thanks to the Lord of lords... Give thanks to the God of heaven."

"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ."

Alleluia! Amen!